

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** **MAGAZINE**

NOVEMBER 1998

EMMA

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a jeweled clip,
a bullet in a skull.

BY BENTLEY DADMUN

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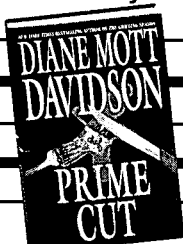


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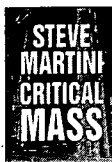
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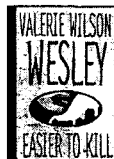
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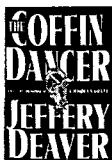
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New Poetry Contest

\$48,000.00 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the brand new North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

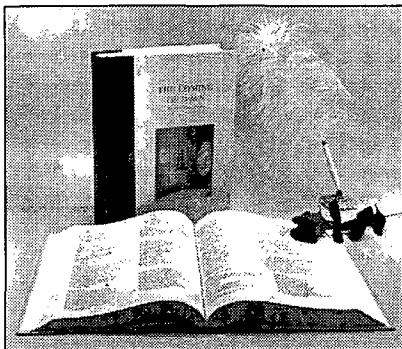
How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in **ONLY ONE** original poem, any subject, any style, to:

The National Library of Poetry
Suite 6127
1 Poetry Plaza
Owings Mills, MD 21117-6282

Or enter online at www.poetry.com

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.



*The National Library of Poetry publishes the work of amateur poets in colorful hardbound anthologies like **The Coming of Dawn**, pictured above. Each volume features poetry by a diverse mix of poets from all over the world.*

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

"Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after sourcebook for poetic talent," added Mr. Ely.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

This issue is traditionally a Halloween issue (of sorts anyway); readers on the lookout for touches of the season will find Dave Waskin's unsettling "Masks"; the Mysterious Photograph, also unsettling; and Guy de Maupassant's downright chilling "Was It a Dream?"

As for the rest of the issue, "Phobia" by William Hallstead and "Under the Oaks" by Pamela Blackwood are skin-prickling indeed; that Halloween icon, a cat (this one most friendly, however), appears (wait and see) in Bentley Dadmun's "Emma"; and there's an eerie scene on the landing in Sherrard Gray's "The Dog That Wouldn't Sleep."

But then suspense is always one of our watchwords.

We are glad to introduce a new writer, Wilder Perkins, author of "Hoare and the Passed Master," his first published piece of fiction. A second story will be along soon, and in between, Mr. Perkins' first novel, *Hoare and the*

Portsmouth Atrocities, is coming from St. Martin's this fall. All are set in England in Napoleonic times; all are about an injured Royal Navy lieutenant, Bartholomew Hoare, whose staff job in Portsmouth for the port admiral keeps leading him into the investigation of crime. (Come to think of it, a cat plays a role in this story, too.) Mr. Perkins, educated at Harvard, is a management consultant and lives in Maryland, where "he believes he controls the largest collection of walruses south of the Canadian border."

We often hear from readers who report difficulty finding us on the newsstand—a problem we are working hard to correct. We would be grateful for your help. Please see the box at the bottom of page 62.

And finally, we now have a Web page, which we share with *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene*. The address: <http://www.mysterypages.com>. Let us know what you think!

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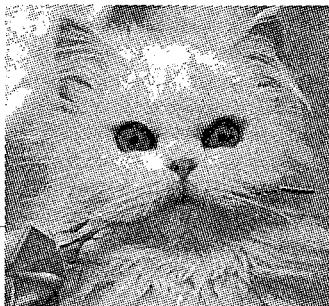
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How You And Your Kitty Can Enjoy Each Other Even More

Pssst! It's here...

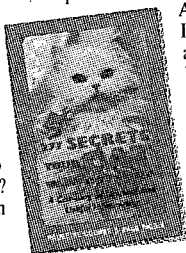
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FICTION

THE TAXI DANCER

Doug Allyn



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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 11/98

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The woman weighed twenty if she was an ounce, and she'd never see seventy again. Still, the old darlin' could foxtrot, by God. She followed Toby's lead like a shadow, swaying when he did, gliding over the recreation room's tiled floor, graceful as a swan.

They made a striking couple, Toby tall and slim in his good gray suit, his silver pompadour and mustache a sharp contrast with his deep chocolate complexion. His partner was a lot less chic in a thin cotton robe over her shapeless hospital gown. Her gray hair was cropped boyishly short for easy shampooing.

Toby glanced down and smiled, but her eyes were lifeless as a potato slice. She probably couldn't remember her children or the name of this rest home, or even who she was. Her feet still remembered the steps, though. She'd been young once, and she'd learned to foxtrot. Probably when it was new.

The old swing tune had another chorus to run, and Toby used the time to scan the room. They'd brought down two dozen elderly patients for today's show. A few couples were dancing to the golden oldie on Toby's boombox, shuffling around like trained bears. The rest watched in varying states of stupor, strapped into wheelchairs or reclining on wheeled hospital beds.

Two male attendants and three nurses were clustered near the coffee urn shooting the breeze, paying only nominal attention to

Toby and their charges. It was time.

Toby escorted his partner to a chair near the CD player, then casually strolled out into the corridor. Empty. Good. Walking briskly to the stairwell, he trotted up to the fifth floor and peered through the safety glass of the fire door.

A beefy nurse was on duty at the station at the end of the hall, but she was facing the other way, taking it easy, reading a romance novel. Well, why not? The Riverside Rest Home had no ambulatory patients above the third floor.

Toby sidled out of the stairwell and around the corner, silent as a ghost. If anyone asked, he was looking for the men's room. But no one did. Most of the attendants were at the tea dance four floors below.

He ducked into the first room. Two patients, male, one asleep, the other staring sightlessly at the window. Toby quickly scanned the medical tray on the nightstand. The usual: Soma, Valium, and Talwin. He took four pills from each container, dropping them in separate jacket pockets, then checked the nightstand drawer. No pills, only a comb and a toothbrush.

As he crossed to the second bed, the patient turned and stared at him, but there was no recognition. Toby copped a few Ativan from the nightstand but didn't rifle the drawer. The old dude might be more alert than he looked.

He checked the corridor, then went into the next room. A woman patient, dozing. Valium, Soma, and, bingo, some Demerol, fifteen bucks a hit on the street. Her drawer held some extra Talwin, plus a Lady Bulova wristwatch. The band looked like real gold. He took two pills, thought about the watch, but left it. He was down on his luck but not quite that far gone yet.

Next room, two males, both out of it. Valium and Talwin from the first tray, nothing in the nightstand. Second guy'd spilled some pills from his tray on the floor. Toby scooped them up and sorted through them, Ativan, Soma, and . . . he hesitated. A tooth? It looked like a broken tooth.

He glanced sharply at the guy in the bed. Eyes staring, mouth agape, a smear of blood trickling down his chin. The veins in his temple were as thick as blue worms beneath his transparent skin. They were utterly still. Not even a quiver. Instinctively Toby backed away from the corpse.

"What are you doing in here?"

Toby whirled, thrusting the pills into his pocket. A heavysset, suet-faced nurse with a mole on her cheek was in the doorway.

"I, um, I was looking for the men's room," Toby stammered.

"There's no men's room in here. Why didn't you check in at the desk?"

"Sorry, ma'am, I guess I'm on the wrong floor."

"I think there's more wrong about you than the floor, mister."

She seized his elbow as he tried to sidle past her. Twenty years ago Toby would have pulled free, dumped her on her wide butt, and sprinted for the stairwell. Maybe even ten years ago. He could almost see himself doing it as she hauled him back to the nurse's station like a naughty child and dialed security.

The cops stashed him in an interrogation room for three or four hours. He had to guess at the time; they took his watch along with the pills they found when they searched him. The room had no clock, only the two-way mirror on the wall, a table, and two metal chairs. He sat quietly at the table, waiting. Trying not to think about having to do jail time again. After a hundred years the door opened.

Mutt and Jeff, Toby thought. The lady cop was short, five five or so, with a pert Irish mug and coarse blonde hair that framed her face. Her plain white blouse, navy skirt, and pumps weren't a uniform exactly, but close enough.

Her partner was tall and gaunt with acne-pitted cheeks and a suit from the bargain rack at Goodwill. He folded his arms and leaned against the door of the interrogation room, looking surly. Toby guessed the woman would play good cop. Stretch would be the heavy.

"Mr. McCann? I'm Lieutenant Erin Maher-Wilkes. The gentleman by the door is Sergeant Nowalski." She placed a tape recorder and a manila folder on the

table, switched on the machine, gave the date, time, her name and his, then read Toby his rights.

There was something familiar in her voice, a lilt, an accent? Toby couldn't place it. Maybe he'd just heard his rights read once too often.

"Do you wish to have an attorney present?" Erin asked.

"I can't afford a lawyer, and the free ones ain't worth what you pay 'em. Look, we both know the drill, lieutenant. Suppose you knock the pills you found on me down to one count of possession, I'll cop to it, and we can wrap this up with no fuss?"

"Possession?" Nowalski said, raising one eyebrow. "You're a real piece of work, McCann. You rip off sick, elderly people and expect us to just let you walk?"

"I won't walk, pal. Possession's five hundred bucks and costs or forty-five days in jail. If I had five bills, do you think I'd be taxi dancin' in rest homes?"

"What's taxi dancing?" Maher-Wilkes asked.

"Are you kidding? No, I guess you'd be too young to know. Years ago you could buy tickets to dance with girls at a hall, like hirin' a taxi. Now it's what I'm down to. Taxi dancer."

"Like a gigolo, you mean?"

"Nah, these ladies got no use for a gigolo, they just need somebody to waltz 'em around the floor for the exercise. I'm no spring chicken myself, but I still got my teeth and I move okay so they book me into rest homes to dance with the patients. Ten

bucks an hour, couple of times a week. Tough to live on."

"So you steal drugs from the patients?"

"No, I steal drugs from the homes. They pass pills out like popcorn in those places, dope those folks up like zombies. A few pills more or less don't matter. They don't miss 'em."

"A shroud has no pockets, as the Irish say. Is that how you see it, Mr. McCann?"

No pockets? Again, something wriggled in the back of Toby's memory. He'd heard that saying . . . and that voice.

"And you're just a poor old codger of a petty thief, trying to scrape by," Erin continued. "What about the dead man? Did he wake up and catch you rifling his nightstand?"

"What are you talking about? He didn't wake up at all."

"Then why did you smother him with that pillow? For kicks?"

"I didn't smother anybody! Honest to God I didn't!"

"Give it up, McCann," Nowalski put in. "One of his teeth broke off in the struggle. It was in your pocket, forgodsake."

"It was mixed in with some spilled pills I found on the floor," Toby said desperately. "I just scooped 'em up."

"Did you now?" Erin said. "Toby, Toby, Toby, do you have any idea how deep a hole you're in?"

And there it was. He remembered where he'd heard her voice. No, not her voice, her tone and phrasing. He squinted, trying to read her nametag.

"What are you doing?" she snapped. "I asked you a question."

"Sorry. Look, lady, you've got my record there in that folder. I been in the joint three times, but always for bunco or petty theft. I ain't the strongarm type. I never hurt anybody in my life."

"Maybe no one paid you enough before," Nowalski said.

"Paid me?" Toby echoed. "For what? I only get paid to dance nowadays, and not much at that."

The lady cop was eyeing him oddly. "Know something, Nowalski? I don't think he knows who he killed. You don't, do you, Toby? Yeah, yeah, I know—" she waved off his objections "—since you didn't kill anybody, you couldn't know who the dead man was. Right. Tell me, does the name Carlo Zuccone ring a bell?"

A fist closed around Toby's heart. "Zuccone? I've heard of Charlie Zuccone. He's a . . . he lends money to people."

"Charlie Zuccone's a lot more than a loanshark and we both know it. He's a local Mafia boss. The man you claim you found in that room was old Carlo Zuccone, Charlie's grandfather, the original mob godfather in this town. Still think you can cut a deal with us for possession, Mr. McCann?"

"I don't know," Toby said, swallowing. "Maybe not. Look, I want to talk to you, lady. In private. No tape. Okay?"

"Forget it," Nowalski began, but the lady cop waved him off.

"It's all right, Chet. Take five,

get us both some coffee, please." She said it mildly, but there was a definite edge of command in her tone. Nowalski started to object, then shrugged and stalked out.

"Well, Mr. McCann?" Erin said. "What's on your mind?"

Reaching across the table, Toby switched off the recorder. "Maher-Wilkes," he said slowly. "Maher was your maiden name, right? Was Mickey Maher your dad? Irish cop? Big guy?"

"My father's name was Mickey, and he was a cop," she admitted.

"Thought so. What you said about the shroud with no pockets rang a bell. Mickey used to say that. We knew each other back in the sixties. I used to work at a club on the river. Motown Underground. Your dad was a beat cop then. Check my file, he busted us once for selling booze after hours."

"So my dad arrested you," Erin said. "So what?"

"He busted me once," Toby said carefully. "Never again. And we stayed open all night for a good ten years after that one time. Do I have to draw you a picture?"

"Are you hinting that my dear old dad was on the take? And you expect me to give you a break or you'll blacken the family name? Dream on, McCann. I know what kind of a cop my father was, and so does everybody else on the force. You can't threaten me."

"I wasn't trying to."

"What then? You're hoping I'll cut you some slack for auld lang

syne because you used to bribe my old man?"

"It wasn't like that, lady. I liked your dad. He was a good cop. Nobody begrudged him a little street tax. You couldn't expect a man to put his ass on the line for what the city paid in them days. He knew everybody in that neighborhood, who belonged and who didn't. He looked out for us. He was one of us."

"Maybe that was because he had a piece of the action."

"Maybe, but I could dance on corners for money at three in the mornin'. You can't walk those streets in daylight nowadays."

"Is there a point to this little history lesson?"

"All I'm sayin' is, if you ask your dad about me he'll tell you I couldn't have done this thing at the Riverside. Toby McCann, the dancin' man. He'll remember me."

"Sorry," she said, shaking her head slowly. "I'm afraid my dad's not giving any character references these days. He's in a rest home himself. Parkview, across the river. Sometimes he knows who I am, sometimes not. Mostly he thinks I'm my mother. Sometimes he even asks me to dance."

"A box step."

"What?"

"An old fashioned step, like this." Toby rose and did a graceful sashay in a square. "It's a dance even a bigfoot Irishman could do. I taught it to him myself, for his anniversary . . . fifteenth, I think. Learned it to 'String of Pearls,' the old Glenn

Miller tune. Wanted to surprise his missus. I guess it was their song or somethin'."

Erin eyed him thoughtfully for what seemed like a very long time. "'String of Pearls' was their favorite song," she conceded at last. "I found them dancing in the kitchen at two in the morning once. The music woke me . . ." She shook her head. "Okay, so maybe you really knew my dad. So what?"

"So since I told you the truth about that, you know you can believe the rest of it. I didn't hurt nobody in that rest home. It ain't my style. Your dad would know that."

"It wouldn't matter if he did. The sixties have been over a long time, Toby. You can't walk away from a murder beef just because somebody puts in a good word for you."

"I'm not askin' to walk. The way I see it, it don't matter whether I go inside or hit the street. Either way I'll end up coolin' on a slab in the morgue if word gets out I was mixed up in the old don's death. I been thinkin' on that, though. Maybe you and me can work a deal after all."

"How do you mean?"

"Look, I swear to you I didn't kill Zuccone. For openers, I had no reason to. Maybe his grandson does, though. Word on the street is, Charlie's real short on bread these days. He's got a gambling jones, they say. He's even been borrowin' money from his own shylocks."

"I've heard that," Erin nodded. "So?"

"So you've gotta figure he stands to inherit serious bucks with the old man gone. But doin' his grandfather isn't somethin' he could ask one of his goons to do. Killin' a don's a heavy thing with them mob types. I figure Charlie must've done the job himself."

"Security at Riverside didn't report seeing anyone."

"Maybe not, but I got in there, didn't I? Charlie could have found a way in, too, and maybe I can show you how."

"How do you mean?"

"I been runnin' scams all my life, lady. Charlie's mean, but he's no genius. Suppose I call him and say I'm a patient at Riverside? Tell him I saw what went down and I want a payoff."

"Pretty thin."

"Maybe, but if he did it, he can't risk leaving a witness alive. He'll have to come after me. You can nail Charlie for his grandfather's killing and get his mob on a plate at the same time. If you're half the cop your father was, you can squeeze Charlie like a lemon for everything he knows."

"Maybe," Erin conceded. "And what do you want in return?"

"Get the D.A. to cut me a walk on the rest home bust and front me some travelin' money. I'll have to boogie on down the road after this."

"Unless Charlie doesn't show up," Erin said evenly. "In which case you'll probably be doing life in prison for murder. And a short life at that."

They smuggled him into the home in a linen delivery van after midnight and moved him into a suite on the fifth floor across the hall from the late Don Carlo's room. He phoned Charlie from the hospital so the number would check out if he verified it. Zuccone listened to Toby's pitch in silence, then told him to wait. Was he coming? Who knew? So Toby waited. Alone.

He was dressed like a patient, loose cotton pajamas, blue bathrobe, and slippers. The slippers were the worst. Soft-soled and floppy, they forced the wearer to shuffle like an invalid.

Toby startled himself when he glanced in the bathroom mirror. In his rest home duds with his hair awry, he looked like he actually belonged in this zombie warehouse, as if donning the institutional clothing had mutated him into a resident.

Hell, maybe he was. Maybe this sterile room was reality, and his life on the street was a dream. Sometimes when he danced with his elderly partners they'd murmur to themselves, talking with departed loved ones or reliving scenes from their lives. Perhaps he was doing that now, pacing the room in his slippers and robe, waiting for a visitor who only existed in his mind.

The bed, with its clean sheets and pillowcase, looked inviting, but Toby fought the urge to rest. Truth was, he was terrified of the damned thing, afraid that if he dozed off he might awaken as just another drift patient.

He was no kid, hadn't been since Jackie Robinson signed with the Dodgers, but he wasn't done living yet, not as long as he could dance a little and enjoy a song and a sip of wine and a woman's smile. And even if his time was up, he didn't want to end in a place like this. Better to take a midwinter walk on a frozen lake and do a buck and wing till the ice gave way.

The door opened, and a familiar figure stepped in, the beefy nurse with the mole on her cheek who'd caught him before. "You?" she said, scowling. "I thought the police arrested you for murdering one of my patients."

"It's okay, the cops brought me back," Toby said. "Check with the chief of security. He knows about it."

"He said they put somebody in here, he didn't tell me it was you."

"Look, I didn't kill anybody, lady. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"You still are, sport." Without warning she drove a meaty fist into his midsection and spun him around into a choke hold.

"Hey, ease off," Toby gasped. "You're making a mistake."

"Not as big as the one you made when you told Charlie you saw something. He's holding up my money until I settle your hash." She jerked his robe down around his waist, pinning his arms at his sides.

"Your money?" Toby stammered. "You mean—"

"Save your breath, pops, you're about to learn how to fly." She

hauled him to the casement window and began cranking it open.

"You'll never get away with this! The cops know I'm here!"

"Yeah, but right now they're all down in the lobby watching the doors and elevators. This way they'll figure you really killed the old don, you were overcome by guilt and jumped. It's not neat, but it'll have to do."

"Help! Somebody—" Her forearm slammed into the side of his head, wobbling his knees. Dazed, he felt himself hoisted up on the sill, felt the bite of the icy night wind through his thin pajamas. The chill shocked him back to awareness, and he caught a blurred glimpse of the parking lot five stories below. With a last despairing lunge, Toby vaulted backward with all the force his wiry thighs could muster.

His thrust sent them both crashing onto the bed. Toby tumbled off the far side, but the door was closed and his arms were still tangled in the robe. No escape. Kicking off his slippers, he staggered to his feet as the nurse came charging around the bed after him.

"Help! Somebody!" Pirouetting like a toreador to avoid her rush, he kicked the door, hard. He could hear noise from the hallway now, patients yelling. He dodged aside a second time, but the room was too damned small. She clutched his dressing gown as he whirled past, hammered the wind out of him, then dragged him back to the windowsill and lifted him up.

She had him halfway out the window when Nowalski and Erin burst through the door.

"It's about time," Toby said as Erin Maher-Wilkes stepped into the interrogation room. "I been goin' nuts in here."

"Sorry," Erin said, placing the tape recorder on the table. "It took me awhile to convince Florence Nightingale to give Charlie up. She's a stubborn woman."

"A mighty tough one, too. She bounced me around like a bean-bag. So what about our deal? I held up my end."

"Not quite. You promised to deliver Charlie Zuccone; instead I had to save your butt from the Dragon Lady."

"Hey, how was I supposed to know Charlie hired somebody on the inside? I did my part and damned near got killed for my trouble!"

"Relax, Toby, I was just jerking your chain." Smiling, Erin tossed a brown envelope on the table beside the recorder. "There's five grand in there, the department's snitch fund for the month. You earned it. The prosecutor agreed to let you off with probation for

your rest home scam, but I'd steer clear of them from now on if I were you."

"Don't worry about that, I'm never goin' inside one of them places again as long as I live. Am I free to go now?"

"Not just yet," she said, fitting a cassette into the tape recorder. "I've been thinking about what you said, about my dad and the way things were in this town thirty years ago compared to how they are now. I know he was on the take in those days, hell, most of the force was. Some of that money probably paid my way through college. Maybe that's why I resented it so much." She took a deep breath and pressed the PLAY button on the recorder.

"Anyway, before you go, Mr. McCann, I'd to ask you for a favor. If you wouldn't mind?"

When Nowalski passed the interrogation room a little later, he froze dead in his tracks. Lieutenant Maher-Wilkes and Toby were dancing together, gliding gracefully around the barren room to a tinny old song on the tape machine.

The Glen Miller Band playing "String of Pearls."

MASKS

Dave Waskin



When I was in grade school, an older boy from another part of town began stalking me.

His name was Chuckie Garver. He always wore a hideous mask—we'd never actually seen his face—and made a habit of driving the roads where we lived, menacing the small boys he came across. We all knew he was crazy although it wasn't until later,

when he was arrested for burning down half the neighborhood, that we learned how fully disturbed—how much of a juvenile lunatic—he really was.

His mask was one of those full-faced rubber ones, the kind that fit over your whole head and stick to your skin. He didn't seem to wear it to conceal his identity. He wore it to frighten people and enhance his reputation. It worked.

With the exception of one foolish boy who wore glasses and read books and claimed no fear of Chuckie Garver, my friends and I all had nights when Chuckie crept into our dreams like Freddy Krueger and sank his fangs into our souls.

It was like living with crime in the big city. You had to avoid getting caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Most of my friends were able to do this. I wasn't.

The afternoon was cool, it was mid-October, the leaves were changing color on the trees. Apples had fallen onto the dirt roads where I lived. I decided to pick one up and see how far I could toss it. There were actually two neighborhoods in the area back then, one old and one new. The dirt road I was on divided them, and the imposing, partly constructed houses of the new neighborhood made inviting targets. The World Series was under way. How good was my fast ball? I wound up, got good hip, wrist, and shoulder action into it, and prepared a perfect strike. But my fingers slipped, and the throw went wild. I had been hoping to hit one of the new houses.

I hit Chuckie Garver's car instead.

It had come rocketing over a hill, faster than I would have thought possible, and the apple drifted in mid-flight, vectoring in on his windshield with horrifying speed. I watched as it made impact, broke apart, and came showering down on the roof and hood.

When he slammed on the brakes and got out—already wearing the mask—I wanted to explain. I wanted to say, look, it's not so bad. It was just an accident. But there were parts of smeared apple oozing like paste all over his windshield. Maybe it wasn't so bad. But it was bad enough.

If I'd had more courage, I would have put up a fight, or laughed and winked and offered him some porkchops to go with that applesauce, *ha ha*. But I was too mesmerized by the mask for any of that. It was a man's face in an expression of rage—violent, unrelenting rage—that had made the cheeks dark red and brought out a network of snaking blue veins through the forehead. The eyebrows were solid black strokes drawn at a furious angle, and the lips were peeled back to reveal a mouthful of savage, pointed teeth.

Chuckie didn't speak as he towered over me, breathing hard like Darth Vader, but he said plenty.

He said, *I'm going to introduce you to someone, kid.*

He said, *That someone is named Terror.*

He said, *How do you like Terror so far?*

That evening a line of thunderclouds colored the sky like a dark bruise. Leaves curled and fell in our yard. My mother mixed a salad with fresh tomatoes to go with our dinner of sloppy Joes, which she told me to eat upside down so the meat wouldn't leak out. For

dessert she served angel food cake with strawberries and ice cream while my father spoke lightly about a meeting of the township board. It meant little to me.

After dinner my mother helped me with my Halloween costume. It was my idea to be a robot, since the necessary materials were already on hand: a cardboard box I could cut and wear like a vest, a can of spray paint I could use to make the box look like metal, and old speaker wires from my father's stereo that could be taped to the front for overall effect.

I thought about Chuckie Garver the whole time. Later, when I went to the kitchen for another piece of cake, I thought about telling my father. He was a local politician who had once been a real politician, joked his friends. That meant he had worked in a higher level of government long ago. Now he was retired from that, older than the fathers of most of my friends but still interested in protecting our township from growth. I knew he didn't like the new houses.

But he never complained about them. He liked to sit at our kitchen table and look out our bay window as dusk came sliding in. I always imagined he was solving his problems then—letting the gears lock and turn in his head—without letting on that he had them.

Sometimes when he was done he would turn and tap me on the shoulder and say, "Goodnight, son," as if there could never be anything wrong with the world.

I didn't want to violate that code. I wanted to look out the window, keep silent, and let the gears turn in my head, too.

But when I tried, there wasn't any turning. Just flashing memories of Chuckie and the window view of new houses going up at the edge of our property.

"Chuckie Garver is a bad guy. Do you get it?" Mike Abbott looked at me. We were in the new neighborhood a day later, exploring one of the houses under construction.

"I know he's a bad guy. But I need to know how bad. I need to know the stuff he's done to other people."

Mike thought about it. "Why do you want to know?"

"Because I think he's coming after me."

Mike thought about it some more. He was a big, slow-moving kid who liked to tell long, exaggerated stories. He also had a deep, rolling laugh that made all the girls at school want to hug him, as if he were a friendly bear.

"Why didn't he just kill you yesterday? After you hit his car?"

"I think he wants me to be scared for awhile."

We moved through the first floor of the new house, stepping past fresh two-by-fours and broken pieces of drywall.

"Well, you've already heard a lot of the stories," Mike said. "But I heard a couple more the other day. I heard that Chuckie was out to get this one kid, so he soaked a sponge in grease and fed it to the kid's dog."

"The dog died?"

Mike nodded.

I shuddered. "What else?" I had decided to hear it all, to prepare myself.

"Well," Mike said again, "Chuckie keeps a trash bag filled with bars of soap in the back of his car."

"Yeah?" That didn't sound so bad.

"It's so he can beat you with it and not leave any bruises."

"Oh."

We went down a flight of stairs. We had a routine when it came to investigating the new houses: wait for the carpenters to leave, toss a few dirt clods, then go into the main level. Listen to the floor creak beneath our shoes and stay alert for anyone who might catch us intruding. Then step through the skeleton walls and survey the cool, subterranean depths of the basement before heading up to the second floor.

"You're really sure Chuckie is coming after you?"

"I'm pretty sure."

In the distance we could see people decorating their porches with pumpkins and stalks of corn.

"Well," Mike went on, "there's another thing I heard. It's about razor blades. Chuckie likes to slide them under your fingernails so that, you know, your fingers get so sore—" Mike looked at his big stomach the way he did during spelling tests in school—"so sore that you can't do anything for weeks. Not even throw a baseball or pick up a pencil. Or wipe your own butt," he added.

"Thanks," I said. "I really need to know that."

"You said you wanted to hear stories."

"Okay. Anything else?"

"Well," he spit at the ground below, "Linda Davenport likes you."

I sat behind Linda Davenport in school. She was one of the best students in class and one of the best liked, although at recess she stayed with a few close friends rather than hanging out with the other popular girls, who ran in packs. Sometimes I saw her at the public library. The township meetings were held in an adjoining building, and the library could be a good place to escape—our parents let us go there if they were attending the meeting.

A day after my talk with Mike Abbott I saw Linda's mother at a meeting. She chatted with my mother. I didn't see Linda. My father was occupied, since he ran the township board, so I slipped away to the library. I had never talked much with Linda and didn't know what I would say if I found her. My pulse was jumping. She had arching eyebrows and hair that smelled like green apples and sunshine.

After I walked through the fiction aisles, I passed reference and biography. Still no Linda. I picked up a book and sat down at a table, hoping she would appear and find me. Finally I looked through some magazines and then trudged to the hallway. From there I heard an argument

behind the meeting room doors. One of them was open a crack, so I watched what was happening.

I didn't understand the details, but I knew an election was coming and that my father was being challenged for township supervisor. His opponent supported the development of the new houses all over town.

My father was clearly against that. He told people that we lived in a special place at a special time and said our community deserved all the protection we could give it.

All of you should know something else, he added. Those new houses aren't up to our safety codes.

That produced a burst of talk and activity. I couldn't tell if Linda Davenport was in there. At the moment all attention was on my father. One man started lecturing him, saying he had lost his touch for politics.

My father looked bored.

Afterward in the hallway one of my father's friends explained the situation. He said it all had to do with money. The new houses were bringing money in, and that was the only thing most people cared about.

Many stopped listening when he said this, and I knew that didn't bode well for the election.

But none of it seemed to bother my father. I thought about it later, lying in bed. Did he react to all problems this way? Would he appear so calm if he were pursued by Chuckie Garver? I determined that he would, but it didn't

really help me. My dreams that night were filled with images of Chuckie moving quickly as he pursued me down corridors that were long and empty.

At school we drew pictures of dark castles and drifting clouds. We taped them to the windows next to the pumpkins and bats we'd cut from orange and black construction paper. We read a poem about a talking raven and a story about a dead man's heart beating louder than churchbells. Then our teacher, who was young and pretty and filled with enthusiasm, made each of us tell the class what we were going to be for Halloween. When it got to be my turn and I explained that my costume was made of cardboard—a cardboard box—a few boys in the back of the room snickered. Our teacher reprimanded them, but my face still turned red. I could feel Linda Davenport watching me.

At recess she broke from walking with her one or two friends and came over to me.

"I like your costume idea," she said.

"Yeah?" I rolled my shoulders, trying to remain distant and cool. But my throat felt dry.

"You heard me say I'm going to be a black cat," she said. "But I'm going to be a different kind of black cat—a kind that brings good luck instead of bad."

There were distant shouts from other kids on the playground. It was like I'd feared at the library: I couldn't think of what to say.

"Do you want to go trick-or-treating together?" Linda asked. "My other friends live too far away, but I think you live close. We could go to all the new houses and get lots of candy."

"There aren't a lot of people living in the new houses," I said stupidly.

"Well then, we'll go to the old houses."

"All right," I said. "I'm going with the Abbotts, too. Is that okay?"

"Sure. I think Mike Abbott is funny."

I thought so, too, but didn't tell her he was watching us from the top of the jungle gym, shaking his hips whenever I looked in that direction. We decided our parents could make the arrangements for Halloween. When the bell rang to end recess, we stormed the double doors that led into the school. We ran with the other kids, but our steps were quicker and lighter, I think, and through the afternoon we exchanged a series of quick, looking-away glances. By the time I got off the school bus that afternoon, I had revised my view of the world. It was no longer a place where only bad things happened. There were good things, too. And, I thought, maybe there were ways of dealing with the bad things.

"You're sure about this?" Mike Abbott said.

"It's an idea."

"So let's try," said Mike's younger brother Mark, who had come with us.

We were on the front porch of a big house, our bicycles parked in the driveway. Mark pressed the doorbell. My idea was to get the opinion of the one boy who claimed no fear of Chuckie Garver—the boy who wore glasses and read books. His name was Kevin. We had never been to his house before, although we knew which one it was because our school bus always dropped him there.

It turned out he had a telescope mounted in his room and a shelf full of software to go with the computer that sat on his desk.

"I never said I wasn't afraid of Chuckie Garver," Kevin said as we sat on the floor. "What I said was, there's no *need* to be afraid of him."

There was eerie, hushed silence as we tried to fathom this. We were awed, too, by the way Kevin seemed so in charge of himself outside of school. Inside school was a different story. At recess he stayed close to shelter and never came near the playground with everyone else. Part of this, I knew, was due to the extensive orthodontic work he was undergoing. In addition to braces, Kevin wore a delicate, cumbersome set of headgear that seemed complicated beyond all reason. Other kids would swoop down on him if he strayed too far from adult protection, and the headgear would be knocked out of adjustment. The Abbotts and I never picked on Kevin like this, but it occurred to me that we never went to his aid, either.

It was Mike who spoke first.

"Why is there no need to be afraid of him? Did you turn him in to the police?"

"The police?" Kevin shrugged. "The police like to have proof. Most people only have stories about Chuckie."

"Then why is there no need?"

Kevin tapped a pencil against his teeth as if deciding the best way to explain.

"There's no need . . . because chance favors the prepared mind," he said.

The Abbotts and I looked at one another. The closest we came to Kevin's level of philosophy was discussing whether the powers of certain superheroes would work on other planets.

"All right, I'll take you through it step by step," Kevin finally said. "But what I tell you has to stay confidential. I don't want it getting back to Chuckie that I know his secrets. Now, let me show you something."

He motioned us to his telescope, which was aimed out the window. We took turns peering through the eyepiece.

"I don't see anything," Mike complained. "Just the barn."

"That's all you're supposed to see," Kevin said. "Now let's take a walk."

He clicked out the lights. We noticed his room was wallpapered with a map of the constellations that glowed in the shadows. The Abbotts and I tried to linger and examine the details, but Kevin rushed us along.

"Where we're going," he said,

"we don't want to get caught after dark."

We all knew about the barn. It was a creaky, abandoned landmark left over from a time when all the neighborhood was farmland. In daylight kids used it as a meeting place. Adults considered it part of the scenery. Beams of sunlight filtered through its rafters, field mice darted through its walls, and dust drifted on the air inside. Kevin led us there from his house.

"A few weeks ago I noticed a car driving to the barn," he said. "I noticed someone getting out and going in. With my telescope I could see it was Chuckie Garver."

Because we were walking outside, Kevin had donned a football helmet to protect his headgear. He had also gone back and pulled a clipboard from his desk drawer.

"The car started coming most evenings and afternoons," he said. "Soon, I noticed a pattern."

He showed us the clipboard. There were days of the week written in columns across the top and times of day written in rows down the side. There were boxes in the middle with scratch marks in them.

"This tells me how often he comes here, and at what time of day. If I need to go out, I check the chart to see if it's a time when Chuckie is likely to be at the barn or on his way. See? Chance favors the prepared mind."

Mike, who had been collecting

acorns as we walked, threw one that accidentally hit Kevin's helmet. It made a loud noise and ricocheted off to the side.

"What does it matter if he's at the barn or on his way?" Mark Abbott said.

"Because that's when he looks for victims. It's like this. He arrives, I mark my chart. I watch the time. Sometimes he stays inside a long time. But usually he comes out after about ten minutes. I can see him then, and he's always wearing the mask. I mark my chart. Then he comes back, usually an hour or two later depending on the day of the week. He goes inside, I mark my chart. Minutes later he comes out, and the neighborhood is safe until next time."

I thought it over. "Are you saying he's not wearing the mask when he arrives?"

"That's it. He comes to the barn, puts it on, and goes hunting. Then he comes back, goes inside, takes it off, and leaves."

I tried to wrap my mind around the concept. Were there really times when he didn't wear the mask?

"You've seen him without it?" I asked.

"Not really. Not exactly. When he arrives and walks in, his back is to me. When he leaves at night, it's always too dark."

We stopped in front of the barn and stared at Kevin's clipboard. Finally Mark Abbott said, "Do you think he hides the mask in the barn when he's not wearing it?"

"That's what I think," Kevin said. "If not, he's driving all the way here just to put it on."

"So the mask might be in there now?"

"You're catching on."

"And if we went inside and took it—"

"He might not seem so scary," Mike finished.

"That's true," Kevin said.

Mark went to the barn's entrance, a heavy sliding panel. He looked at us over his shoulder and pushed. It didn't budge.

Kevin pointed to a shiny padlock that was looped through burnt metal rings at the end of the door.

"That wasn't there before," Mark said.

"Not before Chuckie made this place his hideout."

"Maybe we should break in," Mike said. He drifted toward the barn and found a rusted piece of metal, something that looked like a crowbar.

"I bet we could pry off some of those old boards with this."

The afternoon was just starting to darken. I looked at my watch, which had glow-in-the-dark hands that would show inside the barn. But Kevin's chart didn't leave us much time.

"We're safe for ten minutes. After that . . ." he raised his shoulders.

The Abbotts waited for my vote. I thought of the vampire movies I'd seen in which the hero wasted time until sunset then went off to kill Dracula once it was dark out. It never made sense.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get out of here."

Back at Kevin's house, Kevin seemed surprised when Mike asked what he was going to be for Halloween. Kevin's mother was standing behind us, and we were all embarrassed by the silence.

"Why don't you come trick-or-treating with us?" Mike quickly offered. "Linda Davenport is going, too."

Kevin glanced at his mother. Then his face clouded over.

"I don't have a costume," he said.

Mike and I looked at each other and I decided to say what we were both thinking.

"Why don't you go as a football player?"

It seemed obvious, since he was still wearing the helmet.

When I rode home from Kevin's, the air smelled like woodsmoke and cedar. The Abbotts were late for dinner, and under Mike's direction they peeled off to try a different route. Mike took an authoritative tone with Mark that made me feel like an outsider.

"It's getting late," he proclaimed. "We're taking a shortcut."

Mark always deferred despite being only a year younger and a better athlete and student. I watched them ride away with Mark going slower so Mike could keep up.

If not for our visit with Kevin, I might have worried about the

Abbotts. Their shortcut was going to take them past the spot where I'd encountered Chuckie Garver. But Kevin's way of watching and recording made Chuckie seem manageable. It was simple. Study the chart, stay indoors, stay away from the barn.

I dug harder at my bike pedals, feeling energized. I was on a dirt road but one that was smooth and fast for cars. The houses around me were the old ones, set back from the road and guarded by apple trees. The October gloom of the day was closing in just enough for candles to glow from a distance, and as I tore past on my bike, tiny flames flickered and twitched inside the mouths of jack-o'-lanterns. I was thinking about Linda Davenport and wondering how much candy we would get—good candy, not the pennies or coupons or toothbrushes some clueless people gave out—when a car appeared before I could stop or change direction.

He had driven up from behind and turned in front of me as if to create a roadblock. When my bike crashed into the passenger side, I flipped—flew—over the roof. My eyes stayed open the whole time, and in a strange, swirling collage I saw the road, the sky, the handlebars of my bike falling behind me, and a mixed jumble of tiny, faraway jack-o'-lanterns sitting still on their porches but also dancing around me, fiery grins, pointed teeth, flame-for-breath jack-o'-lanterns dancing on air . . .

... And then there was only the mask, that furious-man mask, no more than an inch from my face.

It's the return of Terror, he said, holding a razorblade to my throat. *You didn't think we were finished, did you?*

"I guess there's nothing more we can do."

It was the voice of a man who worked with my father—the man who had spoken in his defense after the township meeting. There were several men who often came to my father with problems—various community concerns—and my father welcomed them into our home.

There seemed to be a sad flavor about this visit although it was comfortable and relaxed.

"The election is too close," my father's friend said. "He's got you. I didn't want to believe it, but I think it's true."

It was late, and I should have been in bed. But I didn't want the nightmares that came with sleep, and had heard their voices.

When I peered around the corner into the slice of light that came from the kitchen, I saw the man extend his hand.

"If there's ever anything I can do for you—" he began.

But my father waved it off. "That's what I should be telling you," he said.

"Honestly, I don't think we've had a better supervisor," said the man. "You just ran into a piece of bad luck, which is unusual for you."

My father lifted a glass from

the table. "To the end of good luck," he said.

The man left shortly after that, and I went back to bed. I wondered if my battle with Chuckie was going to end like that, in some strange but honorable way. Would Kevin be there to wish me well and shake my hand? Would the Abbotts?

I tried not to have such thoughts. But they were unavoidable.

Because after he had threatened me this last time—balancing the razorblade on my windpipe—Chuckie had gone one step further. He had dropped a crumpled piece of paper onto my chest, and once he left I did exactly what he wanted me to do. I unfolded it. Then my throat had turned to rust.

It was a yearbook photo of Linda.

Halloween came on an unseasonably warm night. My robot costume helped me pretend I was something else—a machine rather than a boy—and for a few hours I could keep my thoughts about Chuckie from overwhelming me. The rush of the evening took over once our group assembled at my house, and even though I knew it wouldn't last, I felt calm because my friends were close by.

My mother took pictures before the Abbotts, Kevin, Linda, and I went trick-or-treating. She was particularly impressed, as we all were, by Linda's black cat costume. Rather than wearing tights or dainty shoes that would

have made her look like a pixie gymnast or ballerina, as many girls did, Linda had on a dark turtleneck, corduroys, and tennis shoes that were painted all black, including the laces. Her mask covered her whole head and gave her a cat's face that looked serene and regal; elegant, almost. The best part, though, was the eyes. Shaded by lime-tinted plastic, they turned to luminous green in the dark, and you could barely see Linda's real eyes blinking behind them.

"Wow," Mike Abbott said. "I wish my costume was as good as *that*."

Dressed as a professional wrestler, Mike had gotten hold of an old one-piece swimsuit that must have once belonged to a very large woman. He was wearing it over old gym sweats that were stuffed with tissue paper to make it seem he had muscles. His brother Mark, dressed as a pirate, tried not to show he was laughing when the muscles began to lose their shape, slipping out of place after we visited only a few houses. Kevin and Linda couldn't hold back, though, and soon the laughter was contagious to the point where Mike himself was letting go of deep, rolling, friendly-bear chuckles.

We started in the old neighborhood and went from house to house in the late hours of dusk, collecting Tootsie Rolls, Candy Corn, Milk Duds, Jolly Ranchers, and all the rest of it. Kevin played leader, and again he seemed to find the boldness he lacked at school. He nodded to other trick-

or-treaters and commented on the spectacle of it. There were the young ones who would be home and tucked in bed before the sky was dark. Then there were the older ones who traveled in roving packs and who, like mercenaries, were in it only for the candy, stripping off their masks when they got tired or sweaty—giving up on the spirit of it but continuing to amass their take.

A few times we came upon the spectacle of the hopelessly naive: adults who had left a bowl of candy at their doorstep, expecting the trick-or-treaters to take only one piece each. Inevitably such bowls were empty when we got to them, already pillaged by the mercenaries, and we would have to move on to the next house, making our jokes and checking the weight of the candy bags in our hands.

But once the time began to pass and the final orange colors drained out of the sky, I could no longer pretend I was a robot or just another boy. Images of Chuckie began to reassemble in my mind, and I started feeling sick at my stomach. It was as if I'd eaten too much candy although I'd had none. Again I could feel the tickle of that razorblade against my throat, and again I could see the picture he'd left of Linda.

The stomach sickness got worse when I lied in front of Linda—saying I was too ill to continue on—and then, strangely, it got better once I was away from her and the others.

I found a dark place, clawed out of my costume and stashed my candy like a paratrooper packing his chute. Then I moved fast in jeans, tennis shoes, and the dark sweatshirt I'd been wearing under my robot outfit. I had forgotten to bring a flashlight, but the moon was full and I knew the neighborhood. I ran from back yard to back yard through patches of light and darkness, falling twice but making good time overall. This was my plan, as simple and direct as I'd imagined a few hours before.

"Are you sure you want to do this tonight?" Kevin had said over the telephone. "You know it's going to be dark."

"I have to do it soon," I said. "And there isn't time to do it right now. Tonight's my best chance."

"Are you sure you want to go alone?"

"I have to. You guys have to stay with Linda. And don't tell her what's going on."

"What if he catches you?"

"I don't want to think about that," I said. "We cut it too close on the way home from your house. We waited too long. But that won't happen again. I'm going to be safe because we're going by the chart, right?"

"You could tell your parents," he said. "Or let someone else steal the mask."

I thought of my father and the way he seemed to deal with problems on his own—keeping up a calm face even if he felt something else underneath.

"Maybe I'll try that later," I

said. "But this will be okay because we're going by the chart."

"Well," Kevin had answered, "it is just a chart."

I stopped running when I got close to the barn. It looked bigger at night than I'd expected—bigger and more alive, like an old man hunched over a cane. Its whole shape was crooked, and I heard wind whistling through its wood. The warmth of the early evening was gone.

I looked for the crowbar Mike had found earlier. I remembered where he'd dropped it, but that had been in daylight. Now I had to sweep my hand through dead grass to find it. When I finally did, it looked like a snake hidden on the ground. My heart leapt against my rib cage. Already I was nervous.

The crowbar had been designed for someone taller and older, and I felt awkward with it. But I had time. The glowing hands on my watch indicated thirty minutes before Chuckie was due. By then I would be back with Linda and the others, mask in tow and all of us safer in a group.

There were broken stones and loose dirt on either side of the barn—I had to go carefully to avoid falling—and a hill in back that gave me cover while I tried to make my entrance. I checked my watch and reassured myself again.

But the back wall was stronger than it looked. Only a few of the boards were badly warped, and I had trouble finding them. I

had to feel for gaps big enough to take the tip of the crowbar. Then I had to get the right leverage.

Once I did, the sound was louder and worse than I expected—like a bone breaking—and it made me turn my head to see if anyone was looking. The wind picked up, and my sweatshirt felt thin. My teeth were cold.

I had crawled into dark spaces before. Mike and I had carved snow tunnels, squirmed under fallen logs, and hidden in big empty tractor tires. But this was different. Outside the moon reflected blue off the barn's exterior. Inside it barely seeped through the cracks. Walking in there was like swimming through deep, black water. After just a few steps I was lost.

There was a warped post I would have hit with my head had I not gone slowly. As it was, I bumped my shoulder and jumped back. Small feet scurried around me. If they were rats, I didn't want to know.

I checked my watch again. Ten minutes had gone by. Had it taken that long to get inside? I'd thought five minutes would be enough inside, but now I wasn't sure. Still, I could take twenty and not get caught. Kevin had added a ten minute safety margin to my half hour, just in case.

With a light breath I felt for a wall and guided myself at a baby's pace. Sometimes in the Abbotts' basement we could see if we let our eyes adjust without the lights. I tried to concentrate. There had to be a place where he

sat or slept or stored things if he spent any length of time here. If enough outlines emerged from the darkness I thought I could find that place—and the mask, if he had not bothered to hide it.

I took another look at my watch and realized that each glance was diminishing my night vision. So I looked away and tried to rein in my imagination. But my thoughts kept getting worse. The first thought was of Chuckie ambushing Linda while the Abbotts and Kevin were preoccupied, counting candy and making jokes. The next had Chuckie intercepting her in front of me, then mocking my attempts to save her.

I tried to move faster. There was the shape of something in a far corner—a box of some kind—and I angled toward it, still carrying the crowbar because it had become an object of security. I found the corner and rehearsed my moves for getting out. Once I had the mask, I wanted to make a burst for the exit and just keep going, quick and clean.

The box was made of cardboard. I set the crowbar down, crouched, and reached inside. The darkness there was too thick for me to see what I was after, but I felt a soft, cool piece of rubber right away. It was heavier than I'd expected. At first I treated it gingerly, dangling it from two fingers as if it were dangerous all by itself. Then I squeezed it into a ball, grabbed the crowbar with my other hand, and came up quickly, charging for the way out like I was run-

ning a race. I was almost there when the support beam loomed terribly close, cracked into my face, and sent me falling backward into a darkness even more smothering than that of the barn.

I woke to the sound of a footstep. A soft footstep, pressing quietly on hard-packed dirt. My brain took the information slowly. The floor was made of dirt. The back of my head was on the floor. The floor was inside the barn, and the roof of the barn was held by a support beam. I had crashed into the support beam. My head hurt.

I closed my eyes.

But there was another footstep. And then something urging me awake, the memory of a savage face and unspoken threats. My eyes opened. To the left they saw the hole I'd made in the wall—broken boards and a beam of moonlight. To the right they saw my own hand, resting near the shape of the crowbar. Back to the left, closer to my other hand, was the mask. Only now it was not the mask at all. With my worm's-eye view and the seeping light from the wall I could see it was a rain hat, or the seat cover from an old tractor maybe. But not the mask.

The dirt crunched again. This time it was closer. I strained to hear more—breathing, perhaps—but sensed only blood rushing in my ears like air through so many seashells. It seemed brutal and unfair the way I had used

Kevin's chart to no avail. Plans, precautions, the presence of friends. None of it mattered, I thought. If Terror wants you, Terror takes you.

He came closer. But he was still moving slowly. So slowly there had to be a reason for it—a reason beyond the plain fact that if you went too fast in there you would blast your head on a wooden beam.

Then it seemed clear: he didn't know I was there.

He had seen the broken boards and sensed something wrong. But he wouldn't be taking his time or moving ponderously if he knew I was laid out like scraps on the floor.

I looked back at the opening, the cracked wood and the moonlight. I'd be dizzy if I got to my feet and tried to move fast. But the wall wasn't far. Chuckie's last footstep put him about ten feet away. So I imagined it first: roll toward the wall, come up running, and dive low at the broken boards. Be out before he knew what had happened.

I coiled my springs and got ready. I thought it could work.

But as he took another step, something held me back. I don't know whether it was fear or fury, courage or cowardice. I only know it was a decision made in an instant—do it here, end it now.

My right hand reached for the crowbar.

The effort of lurching up, getting weight behind the swing, and making the bar go high enough nearly sent me to the

ground. But after hearing his feet I had him pegged. Held by my tightest white-knuckle grip, the crowbar cut sharply through the air.

And missed completely.

The force caused me to lose balance and stagger again, slipping to a knee. Before returning to fear and helplessness, I felt foolish and embarrassed, like an off-balance batter. The bar slid from my hand and rang off the wall; strike three. A twist of nausea grew in my stomach and blossomed under my chest. Then there were words and a voice just beside me. "You really should be more careful. Chuckie could have gotten you again."

And then, when I finally looked in the right place—lower than I expected—there were two curiously shaped bits of plastic peering down at me.

Luminous green eyes.

I kept blinking, expecting them to be gone each time my own eyes opened. But they remained, and were patient and quiet while I recovered my balance and found my breath.

I started to ask a lot of questions that began with "why" and "what" and "how" but managed to finish only this one: "You know about him?"

"Mike and Kevin didn't want to tell me at first," Linda said. "But I knew there had to be a reason you were acting so strange."

Convinced that she was actually real—flesh, blood, and mask—I stopped blinking and thought again of Chuckie.

"We have to get out of here."

"Listen," she said. "When everyone got the news, I wanted to be the one to come and tell you. Kevin said I could find you here."

"News," I said. "What news?"

Her fingers closed around my wrist. It had taken a moment of wandering, she said—of moving silently in the barn until her sight could adjust—but now she had cat's eyes and wanted to lead me out. A moment later we were climbing the hill behind the barn, which overlooked the new neighborhood.

"You don't have to worry about Chuckie Garver any more," she said. "He's been taken away—arrested, they say."

We were near the top. I asked what horrible thing he'd done now.

"In a minute you'll see," Linda told me.

We kept climbing, my legs still a little shaky.

Then I saw what Linda was talking about.

The new houses were burning.

There were reasons for Chuckie's behavior. The explanations filtered down to us through our teachers and parents. He had been a bully. A troubled boy, they said, who picked on others because others had picked on him. What else motivates someone like that? The need for attention, the plea for help, the inner anguish that can find no acceptable expression: all these contributed to his problems, people said. But my friends and I weren't so con-

cerned with it any more. He had been taken to a place where he would get help, and he was gone from our lives.

Fortunately, no one had been hurt in the fires. That meant it was okay when winter came for us to run our sleds down the hills where the houses had been. We could retell the story and let it grow in our imaginations as we jumped from sled to sled, choreographing stunts and spending our afternoons outside. On typical days we walked home with ice in our boots, snow down our necks, and gloves that would be placed over furnace vents or radiators when we got inside. Sometimes we got into arguments, but they never lasted long and were always forgotten a moment later. We never complained about winter the way our parents did, and we never considered the cold our enemy. One day followed another, and we never thought they were going slowly or poorly or quickly or well. We believed one was as good as the next and went to bed exasperated each night because the morning seemed so far away.

One day in April when Linda and I walked to a pond expecting to skate, we found it no longer frozen and ended up making jokes and talking until it was time to leave. I kissed her at the end of that day, and for a moment we stared at each other. Then we laughed again, differently this time, and continued home.

It was almost dark when I

walked up my driveway and saw Kevin on the front porch.

"We were going to study," he said. "Remember?"

My shoulders sank.

Then he grinned and said it was all right. He knew I'd been with Linda.

"How long have you been waiting here?"

"Not long," he said. "I've just been thinking. Everything sure turned out right, didn't it?"

Since I had spent the afternoon with Linda, I didn't have to ask what he meant.

"I guess it turned out pretty well," I said.

The Abbotts and I had talked about it. Not only about the police taking Chuckie away, sobbing so hard he couldn't find words to defend himself, but the way our lives had improved since he was gone. Kevin now approached others at recess and had made more new friends. Mike had grown in popularity since the legend of Chuckie was added to his list of tall tales, and I had found the courage to show Linda how much I liked her.

"As long as you think it turned out all right," Kevin said, stepping off the porch. "As long as nothing about it bothers you."

After dinner that night my parents and I played a board game while we ate strawberry ice cream and listened to the sounds of insects outside our window. For all his new courage, Kevin acted strangely. It bothered him that Chuckie had not conformed to his chart or predictions. There

was a part of him that despised loose ends and suspected the police had overlooked something on Halloween night. I'd dismissed his doubts at the time.

But early that summer Kevin went into the barn and recovered the mask that I'd failed to find. It was stashed in a corner, where the police had not found it either. Kevin showed it to me, dangling it from a finger and letting its dust fall to the wind. He said the mask looked like it had been hidden in the barn for a long time—maybe since before Halloween.

"Before Halloween? That's not possible," I said. "He wore it to burn down the houses. There were eyewitnesses."

Kevin nodded. There were people who knew that Chuckie Garver wore an angry mask and people who'd seen an angry looking figure fleeing the scene of the fires. His face had been lit with rage, they testified. He had looked furious.

I'm just trying out a theory, Kevin said. I'm just wondering if there's anyone else it could have been.

I told him there was nobody

other than Chuckie capable of such a pure act of terror.

But what if it wasn't an act of terror? Kevin said. What if it was something other than that?

I almost asked what he meant, because I did not yet understand about fighting to protect a special time or a special place. I did not yet understand that progress could present danger, and that a community could be damaged if not carefully watched over.

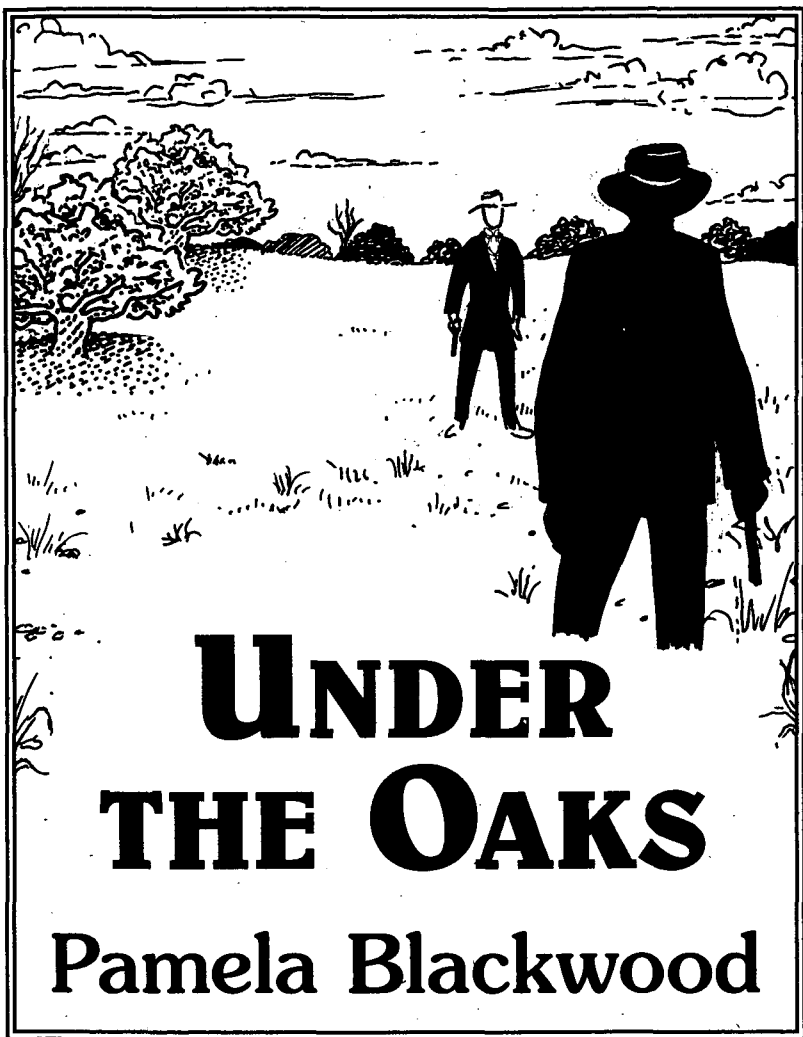
But I remembered the township meeting and knew that because the houses had burned so readily, it had become obvious they weren't up to code. In the end that was what had reversed the tide in the election for township supervisor.

I paused before saying anything else, and it seemed I was moving between two worlds then, either just finished with crossing over . . . or just beginning.

Kevin asked again. Is there anyone else it could have been?

Only if adults wear masks, too, I thought. Only if their masks hide things scarier than ours.

I never mentioned it to my father.



UNDER THE OAKS

Pamela Blackwood

Henry felt the pressure on his shoulder first, then heard the voice. It was Daniel.

"Wake up, Henry." The pressure turned into violent shaking. "Come on, get up. You're in the burying ground again."

Gradually, coming out of the fog of sleepwalking, Henry realized he was outside, kneeling in dead leaves. He saw the waist-high rock wall surrounding the family burying ground and then, in the light of Daniel's lantern, the hand-hewn cross marking

the peddler's grave. He was kneeling in front of it.

The lantern dipped and rose as Daniel pulled him to his feet. "You're going to be joining him, you know." He nodded toward the wooden cross. "If you go through with this damn fool thing tomorrow."

"I have no choice, Daniel."

"I have no choice," Daniel mocked with Godgiven older-brother authority and pushed Henry ahead of him out of the cemetery. "We're going to the stables and talk until I've talked some sense into your head. Here." He took his coat off and threw it at Henry. "You'll scare the stubborn out of the mules like that."

Henry took the coat and put it on over his nightshirt. There was a chill in the night air, a sharper chill than was normal for October and even sharper for a man with one shoe and one sock on. Occasionally on his midnight jaunts he clothed himself normally, but it was not the rule. Tonight his head and one foot were completely bare, and the house was much closer than the stables. He turned in the path, and Daniel bumped into him, sending the lantern light into oblong bouncing arcs on the leaf-strewn ground.

"I'm going to the house for some clothes."

Daniel pushed him roughly ahead. "You're going to the stables. What are you worried about anyway? Clothing a dead man? The undertaker'll have you fixed up smart by this time tomorrow

night. It won't do much to warm you, but maybe the flames of hell will do that."

"For God's sake, Daniel," Henry said, really riled and standing his ground with as much dignity as any man could wearing a night-shirt, a short coat, and one shoe and sock. "You just assume I'm going to lose."

"All right." Daniel changed roles, from ruffian to guardian. "I don't know whether you're going to lose or not. You're a fair shot, considering your weakness—"

Henry turned and walked hard for the stables, ignoring the stab of pain when he stepped on a sharp twig. He walked down the hill and out of Daniel's lantern light, walked on through a moonlit grove of old pine and young oaks, walked on past the double row of slave cabins to his left, and came out in a field of tall weeds. He plowed through them, the word weakness pinching and stinging in his brain, and nearly plunged headlong down an incline when the field ended abruptly at the edge of the road. Regaining his balance, he crossed the road, careful to avoid the wagon ruts, and headed for the soft lantern glow inside the stables. Jacob would be finishing his late night chores, tending the mules.

"Evening."

Henry spoke brusquely in the direction of the lantern that was hanging from a hook between two stalls. Turning away from the light, he started for the opposite end of the stables and almost immediately collided with a tiny

figure. The child hit the dirt floor with a metallic clatter.

"Willis," Henry said and knelt down at once, flinching slightly as he put his knee in the cold water that had spilled from the stableboy's pail. He set the child on his feet and brushed him front and back, recognizing a shirt he had abandoned as useless years ago. "Are you all right?"

The boy mumbled something, and Henry handed him the pail. "Run along to your pa, now," he said and watched the child, now relieved of his load, run in the direction of Jacob's lantern, his pail clanking noisily with every step.

As though he were an angry god, Daniel strode through the stable door and stopped, looking from Henry to the lantern burning at the other end of the building. "I guess this will have to do," he said, pressing Henry forward between the two rows of stalls. "Though God knows, if he hears, it'll be all over Granville County by sunrise."

Henry jerked his shoulder out from under his brother's grasp. "I've had enough of this, Daniel."

"Oh my, is this a challenge?" The older brother drew back with exaggerated fear and held the lantern up between their faces. "Because if it is, my brave friend, I wish most humbly to apologize for my former rude treatment of you and most humbly request the honor of your presence at the far end of the stable."

Henry spent a long moment despising him and then walked

to the end of the building and waited, despising all the while, as Daniel joined him there, then opened a stall gate and nodded for him to go in. Henry continued despising his brother as Daniel slapped the mule to one side, suggested that Henry make himself comfortable on the feeding trough, and hung the lantern up after turning the flame up as bright as it would burn.

When Daniel leaned against the side of the stall and crossed his arms, Henry prepared for the lecture that always followed arm-crossing.

"I wish I had another lantern," Daniel began, "because with this one, even as bright as I can make it; I can't see anything in your face of the fool you're turning out to be."

"Daniel—"

"I'm going to try one last time to talk you out of this madness. Even if you don't care about your own life, and you'd think a man about to be wedded would; you'd think you could consider the others who'll be affected."

"There was no—"

"Ma and Pa still don't know about your little escapade tomorrow, but I guess your honor is more important than Ma sitting at the breakfast table with you in the morning and in the parlor with you all night, you stretched out dead and her in a chair crying her eyes out. Damn it all, Henry!" He threw his arms up in a gesture of exasperation. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Are you going to let me speak?"

Daniel leaned back against the wall.

"I know it doesn't mean anything to you, but to most men, the code of honor—"

"Code of honor," Daniel scoffed. "Code of a pack of fools. And what was your remark, the one that was more worth than two dozen lives?"

"I've told you before."

"Tell me again. Such a remark bears repeating, I should think."

Henry pulled the coat tighter. "I said one of Philip's poems was an awful lot like one of George Horton's."

"The colored bard of North Carolina."

"That's right. I think he copied it."

"And this is worth dying for. The dignity of the colored bard of North Carolina."

"No," Henry said, and straightened. "But Philip challenged me, and a man has no choice but to defend his word."

"You always have a choice, Henry," Daniel gently pushed the wandering mule back to the side of the stall. "It was a remark made in a moment of carelessness. You can still admit that and put an end to this nonsense."

"I stand by what I said. And no man worthy of the title can back down from a challenge."

Daniel studied him for a long moment. "This is about the people, isn't it? Why else defend the colored bard."

"You know how I feel about that. You know I feel strongly enough to free Titus on Wednes-

day, after the wedding, but it's not—"

"Think of Titus, then." Daniel suddenly became animated. "You get shot dead tomorrow, you won't be getting Titus as a wedding present, and those manumission papers will be as dead as you are. Have you thought of that? Have you considered poor old Robert seeing his boy's freedom slip away because of your foolish pride?"

Henry smiled, feeling the upper hand for the first time. "If you're so concerned about Titus being freed, you could take up his cause with Pa yourself, if I'm—I don't win tomorrow. And while you're at it, you could free your own people."

"Bah." Daniel turned away. "You're the only one who's been listening to those daft Quakers."

"They're not daft," Henry said, the familiar passion flooding his veins. "You know I had no feeling one way or the other before I left for the university—"

"The worst day's work Pa ever did."

"—but after attending the Friends Meeting for the last two and a half years with Jeremy, I couldn't help but see it their way."

"And what might that way be, Henry? What's this great revelation that the Garrisonians and the Quakers and Henry Robinson have come across?"

"How can you not see it?" Henry waved his hands in the air, his cold bare foot and impending death receding in the face of his

desire to make anyone else understand. "The emperor is wearing no clothes, and everyone smiles and nods and remarks on the fine cut of his trousers and how smartly his jacket is trimmed. Negroes are human beings, Daniel, no less than you or I. Just a minute ago you remarked how bad Robert would feel if Titus isn't freed as I plan. That's a father's emotion, isn't it, not a bull's or a buck's or a billy goat's. How can you think it's right to buy and sell Negroes like stock? How can you think it's right to own another human?"

"Simmer down, Henry," Daniel said, glancing down the long row of stalls to the other end of the stable. In a moment the quiet sounds of Jacob murmuring to the mules picked up again. "You want him to hear that hogwash? Why don't you just give him a butcher knife and a couple of boys from the neighbors' places, and they can go around the county after dark and make your point."

"Jacob is a gentle man."

"You don't know what sort of man he is, Henry, because they all wear masks. You're looking at him and at all of them through your silly Quaker notions, and it colors your perception. I've dealt with Negroes longer than you, and I can never read a damn thing in their faces. They're as blank as a double naught, and you're never going to get beyond that. And as far as being owned, we're all owned by something, aren't we? Jacob is owned by Pa, but Pa is owned by Willoughby."

"That's absurd."

"It's true, and you know it. He's barely left the place except on business in ten years, there's so much work to be done. And any free man who depends on his own labor for bread is no freer than Jacob or Robert. He might own his body but not his time."

"And who are you owned by?"

Henry began to feel the cold again, his passion flared and spent, wasted against an immovable force. The emperor would always be clothed, throughout eternity and beyond.

"I'm owned by Ginny and the girls, just as you're going to be owned by Julia if you live to see next Wednesday. Have you thought of that? About leaving Julia nearly at the altar and getting yourself slaughtered over some silly remark?"

"Of course I've thought of it," Henry said. In truth, he'd thought of little else since the affair of honor had been set in motion four weeks ago, and it was about to break his heart.

They had had four and a half years of courtship, mostly by post, but this was something to be cherished. He had learned Julia's mind and she his, and in this they were one already. And yet there was still more to learn, a school of knowledge involving other than minds, an education he had been anticipating for some time. It was nearly enough to dissuade him, the thought of lying cold and dead in the ground when there was such a world of warmth awaiting him.

And yet what sort of man dodged a challenge?

"And your life with Julia means less than your pride?" Daniel persisted. "Your children, your grandchildren, mean less than your pride?"

"I would be less than a man if I backed down from a challenge. Less than Julia deserves and certainly less than—"

"That's a lot of damned rubbish, and Julia would be the first to agree with me if she knew about this idiocy. And what about your precious Quakers? I thought they were against taking life. Of course they are, aren't they? They're against war, and what is a duel but two fools who have declared war on each other? They *are* against war, aren't they?"

Henry said nothing, embarrassed by the logic of the argument.

"Aren't they?"

"You know they are."

"And dueling?" Daniel bored in.

"I'm not actually a member of the meeting yet."

"Good Lord," Daniel said, laughing without mirth. He rubbed one hand over his face and sighed. "Well, you've got the mind of a lawyer, Henry. Too bad it's conjoined with the heart of a fool. Is there nothing I can say to convince you to save your life? The simplest of apologies and you could be seeing your wedding day. Your wedding night."

"Did the thought ever cross your mind, Daniel, that I just might not be killed? That in spite of my 'weakness,' " Henry em-

phasized the word with venom, "in spite of that, I might still be a decent enough shot to take him down? There are ways to good marksmanship besides blood sport."

"There are," Daniel conceded. "I haven't seen you using any of them. Since you've been at the university, how many times have you lifted, much less fired, a pistol?"

"Enough. Some of us would leave school and go to target practice once in a while."

Daniel was simply looking at him now, a look that said more than a volume of words, and Henry looked away. He could not absorb such a look of sadness from Daniel. It made the thing real, and for the first time since the words of bravado had begun, he became really frightened.

This time tomorrow he could be no more.

Three nights from now, in the ground.

No, no, it wouldn't happen like that. He focused on the high, jabbering voice of Willis coming from the far end of the stable. When Daniel finally spoke, Henry had regained control of his mind.

"Henry, please listen to me. You said a while back that the emperor is wearing no clothes and yet everyone is remarking on his fine trousers and jacket. Think of it that way. Do you have any desire to kill Philip Colton?"

"It's not a matter of—"

"No rhetoric," Daniel said. "Do you have any desire to kill Philip Colton?"

"Of course not."

"Do you want to maim him, cripple him for life?"

"No."

"Do you think he wants to kill you?"

"He wants to have—"

"Yes or no, Henry," Daniel said loudly. "Does Philip Colton want to kill you?"

"I don't believe he does."

"Then why are the two of you meeting under the oaks tomorrow in Potter's field to shoot at each other? You made a careless remark, and Philip took offense. That much I can understand. What I will never understand is why that remark, or any remark, is worth a man's life. You and Philip are proceeding with organized murder, but lo and behold, because of the so-called code of honor, the emperor is very finely attired."

"You're shivering," Henry said and started to take off the coat, but Daniel reached over and pulled the lapels firmly together.

"Answer me, Henry. Tell me why the emperor isn't as naked as a newborn babe."

"He is quite naked," Henry said. "Every time a Negro baby is weighed and sold like a slab of beef at an auction, every time a Negro for sale is poked and prodded like an animal, every time a mother loses a child because someone needs a little capital. For God's sake, Daniel, can't you see how wrong that is?" He studied his brother's face in the soft glow of the lantern. He could not possibly deny the truth of Hen-

ry's arguments, could not fail to concede that a human being should not be bought and sold by weight.

"Can't you see it's wrong?" he asked again softly, wanting nothing in the world more than the most trifling acknowledgment, the tiniest whisper of agreement. In the dim shadows of the lamplight he could almost imagine that Daniel's head bobbed the slightest amount.

Daniel closed his eyes. "All I see, Henry," he said, his voice lacking its earlier animation, "is a man committing suicide. My only brother committing suicide over some damned remark. I'm not going to let it happen, you know."

"Let's go in," Henry said. He took the coat off and threw it over his brother's shoulders. "You know, there's a whole lot of air around the average man. I think most likely we'll both shoot into it."

"I pray to God that happens," Daniel said. "But one way or another, I'm not giving you up to the code of honor. You damned fool," he said and smiled as he looked down at Henry's bare foot. "Why is it always the peddler's grave, anyway?"

They stood in the shelter of the stable for another moment, Daniel looking out to get his bearings in the dark and Henry trying to think of an answer.

"I don't know," he said finally. "Maybe because he died and is buried among strangers. Maybe because he's alone in the dark."

"That's as good an answer as you've given me tonight," Daniel said and left the shelter with Henry following in the circle of light.

At the far end of the stable Jacob began tending the mules again.

The meeting had been set for noon so neither man would have the disadvantage of sun in his eyes. The place was to be a small clearing under two massive willow oaks on the back of Josiah Potter's land. Seven years earlier the Potter family had perished in a fire that had blazed for several hours one autumn night, leaving two chimneys and a pile of blackened rubble in the place of a homestead and six lives. The small holding had been bought by a speculator who lived in Texas, and Josiah's outbuildings had fallen into decay, his carefully tended fields overgrown with weeds and scrub pines. Even the Potters' graves lay under a thick bramble of honeysuckle and blackberry vines. Only the dueling ground was maintained.

The spot chosen for obtaining satisfaction was perfect in that it was at once secluded from authorities and yet open enough to accommodate the necessary paces and the few men involved in the contest. Henry, arriving on the ground with his second and his surgeon, had the impression of entering an outdoor room bounded north and south by the huge oaks and encircled by trees still thick with fall foliage. He tied

Ajax to a persimmon tree while Matthew Hale, as his second, approached the man who was representing Philip Colton.

After nodding respectfully to Colton, Henry watched the seconds conversing for a moment and then, unable to deny nature any longer, slipped a short distance into the woods and relieved himself. The sound of his own water splashing onto the papery leaves underfoot, of a tree limb cracking and falling, of a crow cawing high overhead, all were intensified as though God had no concern but for purity of sound. He walked partway back to the dueling ground and paused. Under the scarlet canopy of a black gum tree, he took one deep breath to quiet the noise in his brain, then said a small prayer. Afterwards he quickly visualized the faces of those he loved, holding Julia's doe-brown eyes in his mind's eye the longest. When an image of her in black floated up, he pushed it away and walked quickly out of the woods.

Matthew was kneeling on the ground, opening the pistol case. He gestured for Henry to join them in the center of the dueling ground.

Henry, being one of the principals, was expected to be passive as was Philip and both men simply watched as their seconds drew stones from a small leather pouch to determine the choosing of position and the giving of the word. Matthew, on choosing the white pebble, directed that Henry would face south. Colton's sec-

ond, as the loser, would give the word to fire.

Henry and Colton watched as the seconds marked off the distance agreed upon, ten paces, and then each man joined his second at opposite ends of the dueling ground.

An image of Julia floated up

Henry dodged it and wiped his palms on his trousers, his Sunday best because a man had to show his opponent the respect he was due. Daniel, who had no concern for respect, had suggested that Henry save his best coat and trousers to be buried in. "You don't want to go down wearing a coat with a hole in it," he'd joked. Henry had not laughed.

Overhead the crows squawked a rowdy chorus, and below both principals watched as the seconds returned to the center of the ground and loaded the pistols, neither man bothering to watch the other because gentlemen could be trusted in such matters. Henry swallowed a sizable lump in his throat and wondered how a man could possibly need to urinate again after such a short interval of time.

The seconds finished loading and spoke briefly.

Matthew was coming toward him with the pistol.

An image of Julia...

Henry pushed it back and stood up as straight as he could.

Matthew was handing him the pistol, not in his shooting hand, of course, but in the other. He grasped it midway down the bar-

rel with the muzzle pointing toward himself.

Philip Colton, thirty feet away, was doing the same.

"The pistol is loaded and ready for use," Matthew said and then retreated to the side of the field, where Colton's second and the surgeons joined him.

Henry moved the butt firmly to his pistol hand and brought it round, muzzle downward, to the fighting position.

Philip Colton did the same.

An image of Julia...

Henry shook it out of his head and looked toward the seconds.

"You must stand firm until the word is given to fire," Colton's second was saying. "You will commence firing on the speaking of the word 'fire.' You will fire during a count of three, and you will cease firing on the speaking of the word 'stop.' Gentlemen, are you ready?"

"Yes," Colton's voice boomed from the distance.

"Yes," Henry said huskily and then cleared his throat and returned Colton's shout. "Yes."

An image...

Colton's man was shouting the words. "Make ready."

Henry looked quickly at Colton's frame, sizing up the distance between the ground and his kneecaps. Colton appeared to be looking at Henry from the head downward. Henry brought his mark up a little...

"Take aim," Colton's man yelled, and Henry brought the pistol up to Colton's thighs. Colton drew a bead on Henry's chest.

"Fire. One."

A shot cracked from north to south, and Colton dropped to the ground, his own pistol, cool and useless, trapped beneath him.

Henry brought his pistol down, his finger still wrapped around the trigger. He had fired at the lowest limb of the southward oak, two arms' lengths above Philip Colton's head.

He looked at Colton's prostrate form and then at the pistol barrel as if he would find an explanation there.

For hours afterward Henry simply rode, following first one lane and then another until he was thoroughly lost. It had been his goal since leaving Potter's field, for if he himself were lost, surely no one else would be able to find him, and he desperately needed to think.

When he stopped in midafternoon to consult his pocket watch, his mind was still lurching backward and forward, first to this scene, then to that one and then another. Finally, knowing that he had been riding for two hours, he reckoned it was time to start back while he still had three hours of daylight left to help him. Another hour of wandering and thinking and he found a landmark he recognized. Riding one mile farther west would bring him to a road he knew, and from there, he could make it to the cottage by sundown.

He had told his mother at breakfast—was it still the same day?—that he would be spending

a day or two in town at the cottage, putting the finishing touches on the home he and Julia would share. Arriving there just after dark, he prowled from room to room, taking a superficial survey of the work needed and the tools necessary to complete it. Then he extinguished all light and took up residence on the back stoop. Legs stretched out in front of him, back against the cottage wall, he spent the evening staring into the darkness. When his brain finally clouded over with exhaustion, he stumbled into the house and fell onto the bed. Images of the bright red stain spreading on Philip's shirt had left him. He was too weary to entertain them.

The next morning, rising with the sun, his prescription was work. Putting both the past and the future away, he set to nailing up shelving in the kitchen. He put the wooden brackets up and took them down four times, hammering and pulling nails until there was nothing in his brain but the banging of metal on wood. Satisfied that they were as straight as they were ever going to be, he set the shelves in and dusted them off. Taking dishes out of the barrel they had traveled in, he arranged them on the shelves, considering both frequency of use and Julia's height. Several trial arrangements finally yielded a satisfactory one, and then it was time to walk to the music store and arrange for the delivery of Julia's present. A bite to eat in town and then back to

the stoop. With the cessation of activity, his brain recalled the image of Philip on the ground but handed him an answer as well, one he had really known all along. Just as clearly as he could see Philip, he could imagine Daniel in the treetop, holding the emptied rifle close to his chest, waiting for the field to clear of people so he could climb down and go home as well.

He had expected Daniel all day Thursday and had heard nothing. Rising on Friday, with a new workday mapped out, he fully expected to be interrupted by his brother's arrival, in fact hoped to be. Working in the parlor at mid-morning, Henry began to imagine this encounter, running lofty remarks through his mind and discarding them as corny or maudlin. In the end he gave up and concentrated on moving furniture, not even hearing his brother's footsteps on the front porch.

"So you're still here," Daniel announced from the open front door of the cottage. He came in and stopped at the parlor door, watching as Henry rolled first one end and then the other of an Oriental rug and then knelt between the two ends to push the roll in the middle.

"You could help, you know," Henry said. Without looking at Daniel, he stood and kicked the roll farther.

"I could," Daniel said and removed his coat and hat. After surveying the jumble of furniture at the other end of the parlor, he stepped back into the

front hallway and hung his belongings on the coat rack. Picking up a high-backed chair, he set it in the doorway of the parlor. "But I'm not. You don't seem to need much help these days. Anyway, I thought you and Julia were moving in, not out."

"I'm having a piano delivered from Swann's at eleven," Henry said, and in a series of quick pushes, he succeeded in clearing the parlor floor of carpet. "It's my wedding present to Julia. She plays quite well, you know."

"Yes, I know. I've heard her."

Daniel leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs. After studying his boot tip for a moment, he exhaled softly and looked up. "Henry, I—"

"Have you seen the place since I finished with the furniture?" Henry interrupted. "I spent the morning blacking the stove. The kitchen's ready now—it was the last place that needed work. The girl I hired won't be able to start right away, so it'll be Julia's domain alone until she comes. Her mother is ailing, I believe. Not Julia's but Lottie's. That's the girl's name. But everything's done. All but the piano."

Daniel nodded. "You've been here the whole time, then, since it happened? Ma's been worried."

"It's only been two days. I told her I had some work to do here."

"Still, it's not like you to just not turn up for two days, not even for meals. Julia nearly came looking herself."

"She doesn't know—"

"No. I told Ma and Julia that

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you'd been working like a navvy on this place. I hoped it was true and you hadn't gotten yourself tangled up with some of his relatives. When I came by yesterday, I heard enough hammering to wake the dead, so I figured you weren't among them."

"Why didn't you come in?"

"I couldn't," he said simply and looked quickly away from Henry. "Anyway," he resumed after a moment, "I told them I'd see to it that you were at the oyster supper tonight. Seeing as you're one of the guests of honor."

"Yes," Henry said and looked at the blacking on his hands with a laugh. "The guest of honor. What a joke." He rubbed at the stain on his fingers, then wiped his right hand on his shirtsleeve. "Philip?"

"He was buried this morning. It seems the poor fellow suffered a hunting accident. At least that's what his best friend claims. And he should know, since he was with him when he died."

Both brothers fell silent, and the little cottage was filled with the ticking of the clock on the parlor mantel, a wedding present from Julia's grandparents. Henry, with his newfound Quaker love of silence, had objected to the thing but there was no escaping a family heirloom, and so it sat, ticking away, marking off the days and nights of those still above the ground. Henry had busied himself with chores, had not heard it until now, in the silence.

"I've got some muscadine wine

in the cellar," he said abruptly. "And I've just unpacked the toasting glasses. It's warmer in the kitchen. Bring your chair in and get one for me."

Henry left the cottage and went around to the two snowball bushes on the side that marked the entrance to the cellar. He lifted the slanted doors, went down a half dozen steps, and paused for a moment while his eyes adjusted to the semidarkness. In one corner a wine rack holding a small collection of bottles sat atop a wooden barrel. Going to it, he stood for several moments ostensibly studying the labels. In reality he was searching his mind for the words he had known that, sooner or later, he would have to speak. Finally he pulled a bottle out of the rack, looked at the label without really seeing it, and left the cellar.

Daniel had settled in his chair in front of the stove and had brought a dining room chair in for Henry. Henry got two long-stemmed glasses down from the shelf.

"We shouldn't be using these, should we?" Daniel asked. Using the corkscrew Henry handed him, he drew the cork. "They look like the Robinson toasting glasses to me."

"They are," Henry said, holding the ornate glasses while Daniel poured.

"Used only on the holder's wedding night to celebrate the beginning of a new life together. I remember them. Barely. You're lucky to have the use of them. By

the time Ginny and I got around to the Robinson toast I was seeing two of each." He tapped the stem of the glass Henry handed him. "So why are you bringing them out four days early? And with your old brother instead of your new bride?"

"Why do you think?" Henry said, and the easy repartee was over. He took a shallow sip of the deep red liquid and wondered how to begin.

"Under the circumstances I can't imagine," Daniel said and swallowed a third of the wine in his glass. When, after that, he simply sat, musing and rubbing the rim of the glass, Henry began to feel uneasy. Daniel did not muse. His next words were even more baffling.

"I guess it is a kind of new life for you, though, isn't it? Kind of a revelation of the worst sort. And after that big talking-to I gave you in the stable, how I wasn't going to let it happen."

He laughed quietly and took another drink. "I guess you knew the way it was going to turn out all along. Certainly better than I did."

Henry rested his glass on one knee and stared at the man in the chair beside him, all bearings lost.

"I don't know what you're talking about. You knew I didn't really want to fire on him from the start, but I never expected you to take it on yourself to do it for me. I should have been out to your place earlier to thank you, I know that. But I was trying to

find the right words, and it's not easy." He stopped, disconcerted by Daniel's intense stare. "Well, it's not. How do you begin to thank someone for your life? That's why a toast with these glasses is not out of line, not for what you did."

Daniel looked at him for another moment, then closed his eyes and turned his head. He finished the wine in his glass and set it on the marble-topped table beside him.

"What I did, Henry, was get stinking drunk at Keller's Tavern, ride halfway to Potter's place, hit the ground when my horse stumbled, and lie there like a sleeping babe for the rest of the afternoon. I set out to save you, and I got drunk instead. That's the kind of brother you've got. You had to depend on your own marksmanship, which I must admit is considerably stronger than I imagined. Not that I don't still think it's the stupidest thing you've ever done." He patted Henry roughly on the back and stood. "I guess I'll be going. Two women are waiting for my report on the wayward boy."

"I don't believe you." Henry put his half-finished drink aside and stood up himself.

"Oh, but they are," Daniel said. "Julia suggested I hogtie you and drag you back home at once. I think she'd do it herself, given half—"

"No, I mean you had to have been there Wednesday, Daniel. At the dueling ground. You climbed up one of those oaks. You've got

the scratches on your arms to prove it. Right there." Henry grabbed his brother's wrist and pointed to a couple of tiny scrapes. "How'd you get these then?"

"I told you, I fell off Caesar, and I was dead drunk. I guess I was thrashing around when I came to."

"You had to be at Potter's place."

"Well, I wasn't. If you saw me there, you must have had more whisky than I did. And I can't believe that's the case, since you dropped Philip Colton with one shot to the heart."

"But I didn't." Henry sat down, fighting a wave of nausea. After the shots had been fired, he had asked permission, through Matthew, to leave the dueling ground as the code of honor required. But not before seeing Philip turned onto his back by the surgeon, not before seeing his head hanging limply and his white shirtfront saturated with blood. Even at a distance Henry had felt the familiar queasiness that he could never control. Leaving Matthew as well as his own surgeon to attend the dying man, he had managed to ride only a quarter of a mile before dismounting, falling onto his hands and knees, and vomiting.

The pressure of his brother's hand on his shoulder brought him back to the present.

"I'm sorry you had to put yourself through this, Henry. I know how you feel about bloodshed." Daniel sat down again, leaned over Henry, and picked up the

bottle and Henry's glass. After refilling his own, he topped Henry's off and handed it to him. "If you had to go through it, though, I thank God you got off the first shot instead of Colton."

Henry set his glass on the floor. Someday, he hoped, his kitchen would be purged of all references to the destruction of life. He replaced the image of Philip Colton with one of Julia and the children they would have, playing games and laughing in this very spot, and the nausea eased enough for him to speak.

"Daniel, the shot I got off was a yard or two above Philip's head. Another shot came from behind me, from somewhere up in the treetops. I thought they all realized it, but the shots were so close I guess they thought it was an echo. No one said anything about it, so they must have assumed it was my shot."

"Did you look up to where the shot came from?"

"Yes. I couldn't see a thing, not even boot bottoms. You know how thick the foliage is around the dueling ground. And whoever it was had no intention of being seen."

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

"What was I going to say? I was stunned, and anyway, they would have thought I was mad, claiming I shot over his head when Philip was bleeding to death on the ground. I need some air." Henry stood abruptly and kicked over the champagne glass, sending the deep red liquid into a

shallow pool around the legs of Daniel's chair. After a short spell outside, he came back in to find Daniel on his knees, mopping up the mess with a pillowcase.

"This is all I could find," he said, and finishing the job, he threw the sopping cloth into the dry sink. "Sturdy glasses, but I'm afraid I've ruined a piece of Julia's linen."

"It doesn't matter."

"No, it doesn't. Sit down, Henry," Daniel said. "I'm just staying another minute, and then I'm going to let you have some peace and quiet before tonight. But there's something I need to tell you, and you need to listen. All right?"

Henry nodded.

"As far as I know right now," Daniel continued, "almost no one knows about this thing with you and Philip. And the ones who do go along with this silly code of honor—so as far as they're concerned, the affair is closed. Philip was simply unfortunate. The rest think it really was a hunting accident, and that's the way it's got to stay. No Quaker conscience stirring things up, no confessions, no mention of it in any way, and maybe things will die down without anyone's being hurt any more. You and Julia will be married on Wednesday, and all will go on as if it had never happened. In time, maybe even you will be able to put it behind you."

"Never," Henry said bitterly. "It was not supposed to turn out like this. In the end I knew I

couldn't kill him, so I decided to fire over his head. And I think he would have done the same."

"I don't," Daniel said and then held up one hand when Henry started to protest. "Nevertheless, what's done is done. You can't bring Philip back, but you can protect those who are still here. You didn't know, because you haven't been home, but Robert was picked up Wednesday afternoon by the patrollers. He'd left home without a pass, stolen a rifle from somewhere, and was hiding out in the woods waiting for dark so he could come home. They carried him to jail and put him in the whipping post. They claimed they gave him fifteen lashes, Robert says thirty. At any rate he was pretty torn up by the time they brought him home. You know how Pa feels about the patrollers, but there was nothing he could do save complain about it. He was so shocked it was Robert—we all were. Now I know why he did it. Jacob heard everything we said in the stable Tuesday night and told him. Robert was out to save your skin so Titus would still be freed."

"How is he now?"

"He survived. I don't think he'll be running off again anytime soon. But you make it known that it wasn't a hunting accident, and you didn't do Philip in yourself, and there'll be trouble. It won't take long for folks to put two and two together, what with you freeing Titus on Wednesday. Then there'll be a lynch mob, and nobody'll be able to save him.

Just remember that, Henry, if you feel the urge to bare your soul. I'll see you tonight." With that, Daniel left the kitchen, replacing his chair in the hall before closing the front door quietly behind him.

For a good while Henry simply sat, staring at the crimson stain of muscadine wine on the smooth oak floorboards. Then he killed the fire in the stove, took his hat and coat from the bed, and wrote a short note to Swann's delivery men. After tacking it to the front door he left, following the same route Daniel had taken a half hour earlier.

Coming home to Willoughby, he scrupulously avoided the house—there would be no end of tie-up there—and rode directly to the new smokehouse being built up the hill from the quarters. On questioning Davis, the overseer, he found that Robert had declared himself unfit for chores or fieldwork today, and Davis, on seeing his left ankle, purple and so swollen it wouldn't fit into a shoe, had had to agree. And so he'd been put to spinning with the women; he still had one good foot left and two hands, after all. "And somewhat of a backside," Davis added, chuckling at his own wit. "I reckon he'll keep closer to home now, after they laid that strap on his backside a right smart bit. I reckon—" Interrupting with his thanks, Henry turned toward the weaving shed adjacent to the quarters.

He found Robert with his left

leg stretched out in front of him and his right leg busy pumping the treadle of the flyer wheel as he pieced-up the unspun fiber from his lap. One of the older women, Esther, sat in front of him, carding. Some joke had been in progress; Henry saw the remnants of laughter on Esther's face before she smoothed on a new one for him. Robert, turning to see who had entered, nodded at Henry and went back to his spinning, his new face a study in blandness.

Henry walked over to the wheel and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim interior of the shed.

"Morning, Robert, Esther."

This time it was Esther who nodded. Robert mumbled a greeting without looking up from his work. Henry walked over to the other side of the spinning wheel and knelt down, examining Robert's extended ankle, first with his eyes; then with a gentle fingertip probing at the tightly swollen flesh. Robert flinched slightly but made no sound. His fingers fell slack for a moment and then resumed tension on the fiber, drafting and twisting in rhythm with the wheel.

"You've got a bad one there, Robert. Have you had Miss Betsy take a look at it, in case we need to give Dr. Stanley a call? I think he's been tending folks over at Desirette lately."

"No, sir." Robert stole a glance at him, lost the rhythm of his work, and had to readjust the cotton in his fingers. "I never

needed to. I'll be all right, just with time."

"I don't think so," Henry said. "It could be broken. How did you do it?"

"Running from the patty-rollers, Mister Henry."

Henry was looking at his face for the slightest trace of deception, but there was nothing there. The spinning wheel flew, dividing the air around it so that Henry could sense a tiny, pungent breeze. Looking down at Robert's bare arms he noticed several long scratches, shiny with some sort of ointment.

"Did you get those cuts then, too?"

"Yes, sir. I was running, and I fell down hardlike. Twisted up my leg in a woodchuck hole and got cut up mighty bad on some sticks."

"On the ground," Henry ascertained, and in the shadows of the fat lamps Robert's face crinkled slightly.

"Yes, sir. That woodchuck hole was sure in the ground and no place else. And what with them pattyrollers near as my shadow, I was running and not looking."

"Did they pull you up out of that hole, Robert?"

"No, sir." Robert shook his head. "They catch me later and give me a whupping before they brung me home. And a good one, too."

"So I heard," Henry said. "Has anyone tended those cuts on your back?"

"Yes, sir," Robert said. "My boy Titus, he greased my back for me. Just like always when some-

body gits a split back. I reckon it's going to be hard without him."

"I guess so," Henry said lamely. Robert had spoken words of sorrow, of split backs and lost sons, without the slightest twitch or tear in his mask, and for a moment Henry had an insight into a world he would never know. It was there, he knew, a world in juxtaposition to his own but just as unfathomable as that of a fox or an eagle, a world that existed late at night in the quarters, where split backs were addressed with something other than nonchalance. But it was a secret world he could only guess at and would never enter, no matter how many slaves he freed. Robert, sitting before him now, spinning cotton and speaking words of gratitude, was as inaccessible as the cotton in his fingers.

"It's mighty sweet, Mister Henry, to his ma and me," he was saying. "We'll sure be missing him, but it's a mighty fine thing you doing, giving my boy his freedom. We thank you," he finished and looked at Henry for the first time. In the brief second that their eyes met and Henry nodded, they were conversing as men, but it was only a flock of time and then Robert went back to his spinning and Henry went back to the role of master, a role he was gladly relinquishing in five days' time thanks to someone's marksmanship.

If it was Robert's, it was clear that he was not going to lay claim to it in the spinning shed.

"Robert," Henry said, squint-

ing down at the bruised flesh, "I'd like to have a better look at that ankle. You suppose you could step outside with me for a minute or two?"

"It's just fine, Mister Henry. It's not near as sharp as it was last night."

"Still, I'd like to see it in better light. I'll help you out."

"No, sir," Robert said and set his cotton down. He pushed himself off the stool with his hands, putting no pressure on the ankle that was just fine, picked up a long stout hickory stick, and leaning on it followed Henry out.

Henry went around to the back of the shed. Seeing some of the old women out with the children, he led Robert away from the quarters and down a small, well-beaten path that ended at the people's privy. Aware that this might be anything but private, and also aware of Robert's painful steps, Henry looked around for another secluded spot close by, one protected by natural barriers and yet open enough to sense an intruder's approach. The people's woodshed, a three-sided leanto a little farther down the path from the privy, would serve both needs.

At the woodshed, he scouted around for something to serve Robert as a seat. A pile of sweet-gum wood, recently cut but not split, sat stacked outside the south wall of the shed. Rolling one of the logs under the tin roof, Henry gestured for him to sit down. Then he knelt and rolled the frayed pants leg up to reveal all of the injury.

"You say nobody's looked at this ankle?" he asked, putting fingers on each side and pressing lightly, as if testing for something. From this position he could see into the other man's face.

"No, sir," Robert answered.

"Is the pain any better than when it first happened?"

"Yes, sir. My Josie smeared red clay mud all over it, and that's set it to healing, I think."

"I don't know, Robert." Henry shook his head, moving the dirt-covered foot gently from side to side. "Are you sure you got this from stepping into a woodchuck hole?" He looked up into Robert's face, watching for a sign.

The man answered without hesitation. "Yes, sir, I did. Like I says, running from the patty-rollers. I kept to running, and my leg stayed behind."

"And you said they didn't pull you out of the hole. So nobody saw you get yourself out of that hole with this hurt ankle."

"No, sir."

"Well, Robert, I just don't know about that," Henry said, manipulating the ankle and then folding the toes gently as if using some sort of medical training. "This looks like a different kind of injury to me. Looks more like you got it by jumping instead of twisting."

"No, sir," Robert said and shook his head.

"Jumping from pretty high up, like out of a tree."

"No, sir."

"Jumping and landing real

hard on that ankle and maybe getting those scratches on your arms on the way down, too."

"No, sir," the older man answered, and Henry, studying his face, could see nothing there at all. The mask was securely in place, held firm by years of practice.

He stood up. "Robert, I want you to tell me the God's truth. You are a man of God, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir, I am. Try to be."

"I want you to tell me if you went to Potter's field last Wednesday at noon and climbed up a tree and shot Mr. Philip Colton in the chest."

"No, sir," Robert replied, and the mask quivered. He blinked twice.

"If you did, I can understand why. You were taking my part, saving me from dying at Mr. Philip's hands. Jacob was tending the mules when Daniel and I were talking about the duel, and he told you about it. You knew I was planning to free Titus officially on my wedding day, and you were afraid if I was killed that wouldn't happen. You wanted to save me and save his freedom."

"No, sir, I never done that," Robert said, and Henry could see tears welling in his eyes. "It wasn't me who done that," he said so softly that Henry had to lean forward to hear.

"You won't be in trouble, Robert. You can tell me the truth," Henry said, sensing a breaking point. "How could I do anything

but defend a man who saved my life? You knew about the duel on Wednesday, you were out, you had a rifle, and you got yourself messed up pretty bad. How can I not think you did it? You need to tell me the truth. Nobody else'll know, I'll see to that."

The black man bowed his head and sat shedding silent tears that made dark blotches on his ragged brown pants. Henry took it as a confession and put one hand on Robert's shoulder.

"I want to thank you, Robert. You got yourself into a lot of trouble for my sake and for Titus. You saved my life, and you did what you could to get your boy his freedom. Come Wednesday, after Miss Julia and I are married, he'll be a free man and you guaranteed him that freedom."

The slave sat silently for another minute, his head still bowed. Then he lifted his face and wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand and shook his head. Henry could see the struggle, the mask vying for predominance and then the real man and then the mask again. Before losing him entirely, Henry knelt down and patted his knee.

"I'll always be in your debt, Robert. Miss Julia and I, both of us will."

"No, sir. Not Miss Julia."

"Why not Miss Julia?" Henry said and smiled, although some niggling unease was playing at the edge of his mind. "You don't think Miss Julia's sweet enough on me?"

"No, sir," the other man an-

swered. He rubbed at one of the splotches on his pants. "Miss Julia, she plenty sweet on you."

"Well, what then?" Henry asked. "Why would Miss Julia not owe you a debt of gratitude for saving my life?"

"If there's any owing, it's me and my boy that owes, Mister Henry," Robert said.

"I don't understand, Robert. You're the one who got yourself in trouble for us."

"Yes, sir," Robert said vehemently. "I got myself in trouble, I sure did. I tried, Mister Henry. I tried, and I set out to keep you walking the earth if I could. I knowed where I could git myself a rifle." He looked at Henry quickly and then back down at his pants leg. "Yes, sir, and I got me that rifle, and come Wednesday morning, I just left. I left and made my way over to old Potter's place, where I knowed the white folks shoots at each other. I didn't know nothing to do but climb one of them big old oaks and wait."

"Which is what you did."

"No, sir. I got as far as Mister Potter's old curing barn closest to the shooting ground. I was going right fast by then 'cause they say sometimes late at night folks can still see a curing fire burning in that barn and old Marster Potter tending it. Bent over tending that fire and black as coal hisself from being burnt up. And I didn't want to take no chances on seeing him. But just as I was getting near to passing the door, I heard somebody calling my name. I

reckoned it was old Miz Potter at first. Nearly scared this old nigger to death. Then I seen Miss Julia standing in the door of that barn and motioning with her hand for me to come over and whispering out my name to come over and git in the barn with her."

"Miss Julia."

"Yes, sir. And she took me in that barn and shut up the door and she told me to git on home 'fore I got myself kilt, that she was taking matters into her own hands. And then she showed me a big old rifle leaning up against the wall of that barn and told me how her brothers showed her how to fire it off and hit near 'bouts anything she points it at. And she said she didn't have no mind to become a widow 'fore she even becomes a wife. Then she gave me a dollar from out of her brother's britches pocket and told me to give it to Titus for his freedom. And told me to run on home 'fore the pattyrollers catch me. But they catch me anyway and whupped me 'fore they brung me home. And took Miss Julia's dollar out of my britches 'fore they done it."

Henry got up slowly and stood staring at the older man as though he'd been spouting gibberish. When he finally spoke, the sentence, issued from a throat dry as parchment, cracked in half.

"I don't—" he cleared his throat roughly "—I can't believe that, Robert. I've known Miss Julia for nearly five years, and she's

never mentioned even touching a rifle, let alone firing one. Miss Julia is a lady." And, Henry thought but did not add, ladies do not put on their brother's trousers and climb oak trees and fire bullets into men's chests.

"She might be that," Robert said. "But she's a lady who knows how to fire off a rifle and git in and out of trees. It was Miss Julia who went and saved your life, Mister Henry. Not old Robert, though I sure tried. I would've give this whole leg here for it."

Henry nodded without being sure what the man had said. He had lost all senses but one, his mind's eye, although the picture there was crystal clear—Julia, the butt of a rifle pressed to her shoulder, her finger hugging the trigger while she put her sights on Philip Colton's heart. And then Julia, squeezing the trigger, the blast knocking her backwards and ripping into Philip's flesh and draining his blood until his heart slowed and slowed and then stopped.

Julia, who presided over her mother's teaparties with the grace of a queen.

Julia, who left home on hog-killing day and could not endure the crack of a whip on a slave's back.

Julia, who sent him letters fragrant with pressed magnolia petals and filled with the poems of Keats and Shelley and her own creations, rhymes that spoke of the certainty of eternal love and the fullness of her heart, a heart full to bursting with love for him.

Julia, squinting at Philip Colton's chest, hoping to empty his heart of blood.

It was simply not possible.

Henry shook the image away and considered the man sitting on the sweet gum log beneath him. No Negro could survive the murder of a white man. In that, Daniel was absolutely correct. Robert had no choice but to deny his involvement and yet had been clever enough to portray himself as a frustrated savior. For the hundredth time, Henry cursed the peculiar institution that turned human beings into masters of deceit and cunning in order to survive. The only decent thing to do was to play along, and yet Henry couldn't bring himself to do so completely.

"Whatever happened, Robert," he said, and helped the man to his feet, "I appreciate your getting yourself into trouble on my account. I'll never forget it."

"Yes, sir," Robert said, and bent to pick up his hickory stick. He put pressure on the swollen ankle, then grimaced and leaned heavily on the stick. "I 'spect I should've taken on the burden Miss Julia's holding, and I would've if she hadn't sent me on home." He turned toward the weaving shed and took a step. "I reckon it'll take me a good while to git up this hill, Mister Henry."

"You take your time, Robert," Henry said and fell into step beside him. "In fact, why don't you take the day and rest that ankle in your cabin. I'll speak to Mr. Davis about it."

"Thank you, sir," Robert said. "I'll be glad to put this old leg to rest."

"You do that," Henry said and veered off the path in the direction of the new smokehouse. "I'm just curious about one thing, Robert. If you didn't kill Mister Philip, why were you crying a while ago? The way they treated you before they brought you home?"

Robert stopped in his tracks and spoke without turning to face Henry. "No, sir. No patty-rollers ever made me cry, Mister Henry. No, sir. None to this day and none from this day onward."

"What, then?" Henry asked, somewhat taken aback by the man's vehemence.

The stiffness left the black man's spine as though a puppeteer's string had slackened, and he bowed his head. When Henry leaned closer, he heard only a few mumbled words.

"... a chance to help your boy" he repeated and waited for confirmation from Robert.

"... and you weren't able to take it," Henry completed and realized with dawning horror that a man could shed tears for failure as well as murder.

For the next three days Henry worked at putting the whole affair out of his mind. Julia invited him for tea on Saturday, there was church to go to on Sunday, Episcopal, to please his soon-to-be in-laws, and then there were the parties to attend. On Sunday afternoon there was a picnic in

the bride and groom's honor, then a dance at Julia's home on Monday night, and now, on the eve of the wedding, a set supper at his parents' house. The meal had been served at eight, and as was the neighborhood custom, the ladies had withdrawn to the parlor and the men had begun consuming alcohol and tobacco in earnest. When they proceeded to amuse themselves by imitating musical instruments, Henry began to crave a few moments of quiet. Matthew, who had washed the blood of Philip Colton off his hands only six days before, had started tittering away as a flute. Daniel, a drunken clarinet, was holding his nose and going up and down the scale to a silly song of his own invention. Henry waited until they'd begun a trio with a human piano and then slipped out of the smoking room. He stopped on the back stoop long enough to light one of the lanterns his father kept there for nighttime emergencies and then walked quickly down the steps and across the side yard.

He inhaled deeply of the night, which he welcomed as an old, comfortable friend. Stopping at the edge of the woods, he turned and looked back toward the house, which was nearly bursting with noise and light, a boisterous intruder in a world of gentle rustlings and darkness. A week ago he had sought solace in the night without even being aware of his actions. Tonight he was fully aware of his destination. Satisfied that his exit had

not been detected, he stepped into the woods. He would find the beaten path easily and follow it uphill to the family burying ground without even one false step.

His grandparents' headstones, tall white monoliths of marble, would help direct him to the plot. But once there, it was the opposite corner of the burying ground that drew him. He opened the iron gate and crossed the carpet of decaying leaves and pine needles without so much as a glance at his ancestors' stones. Instead, he knelt and placed the lantern on the ground in front of the rough wooden cross that his father had hastily nailed together one summer afternoon. At last he was alone with the lantern and the cross and the night. He slowed his breathing and tried to banish the demons from his mind, a feat he usually accomplished on his knees in front of the peddler's grave.

It would not be so tonight.

For half an hour he knelt in front of the wooden cross until his knees grew tired and painful and demanded to be relieved. Getting stiffly to his feet, he caught the glow of a distant candle at the bottom of the hill. For several minutes, while the candle grew brighter on its way up, he mused on the time he had spent at this place. A dozen years' worth of peaceful meditations would end tonight. With a deep sense of melancholy he bade the peddler farewell. After tomorrow he would be living in

town with a wife. There would be no more midnight ramblings, waking or sleeping.

Even before the candlelight revealed her face, he knew it was Julia coming up the hill. The fragrance of lilacs caught on the gentle night breezes preceded her. Reaching the top of the hill, she blew out the candle, moved the gate open farther to admit her skirts, and crossed the burying ground. For several moments she stood silently at Henry's back until finally he ended his old life for the new and turned to face her.

"I knew I'd find you up here," she said and took one of his hands in hers to warm it. "You'll catch your death in this night air."

"Never," he said and squeezed her fingers. "I've always loved being out at night. What is it Lord Byron said, 'She walks in beauty like the night . . .'"

"'Of cloudless climes and starry skies . . .'" she added and turned to press her back against him and pull his arms around her waist. "But why is it always the burying ground, Henry? What is it about the peddler's grave that draws you up here? You never even spoke with him, did you?"

"No, I didn't," Henry said, feeling her shoulder blades as well as her voluminous soft petticoats pressing against him. "All I knew of him was a few moans. I knew his wares better than I knew him. Daniel and I played on his wagon for a week before Pa drove it into town."

"So what brings you up here?" she persisted gently. "You don't even know his name, do you?"

"No, I don't," Henry said and kissed the side of her neck, moving slowly from the edge of her shawl to her hairline.

She laughed softly and pulled away from him. "So why?" she asked again, pulling her shawl closer around her bare shoulders. "I can't marry you unless I know the answer. It's so lonely up here."

"I know." Henry looked around at the pine trees swaying against a sky full of stars. "I could tell you that's what it is, that I feel sorry for him because he's alone. That's what I told Daniel. But it's more than that." He looked down at the lantern light casting dancing shadows on the wooden cross. "It's the mystery of it. A man came under our roof, died, and has gone on. It's one man's portal to the next world, and his journey began here." He gestured toward the mound. "It's a journey we all have to make alone, and this man has done it alone and is there. But his door is here." He took her hands. "Can you understand that?"

"Yes," she said and smiled. "But it's a funny thing to be thinking about on the eve of your wedding. Didn't you like the party?"

"It was a party," he said, and shrugged. "More to Daniel's taste than mine. I needed to get away from the noise."

"Is there something wrong, Henry?" she asked and touched his cheek. "I know you come up

here more when you're troubled about something. Is it Philip's death?"

Again he could see Philip lying on the ground, the dark red circle spreading quickly, seeping through the useless compress to stain the surgeon's fingers. Forcing his mind to the present, he clasped his hands around both of Julia's and began rubbing them. She had asked a question.

"You mean the accident?" he said finally.

She shook her head. "I know about the duel, Henry."

He was silent for a moment and then spoke quietly.

"How?"

"How do you think? I've got two brothers, and I've got good ears. I know they tried to keep it from me, but I heard them saying your name over and over one night and I eavesdropped on them. I know you felt you had to defend your word, but I have to agree with Daniel." She pulled her hands away and hugged her shawl tighter. "Two men shooting at each other over some petty insult is . . . well, it's stupid." She looked up, her face searching his for any offense taken. "I'm sorry, but that's the way I feel about it, and you know we vowed to always speak our minds to each other. I just thank God Daniel was able to get off a shot before Philip did. Thank God," she whispered again.

"Daniel?" Henry said and stared at her stupidly. His brain, pelted for the last week with increasingly bizarre scenarios, refused

to register her words. "But . . . Daniel said he got drunk and fell off his horse and spent Wednesday afternoon sleeping it off. Lying on the ground in the woods."

"Is that what he told you?" she asked quietly, and somewhere far below the surface Henry felt his soul settle and breathe a sigh of relief.

"That's what he said, that he spent the morning drinking at the tavern, then started out to Potter's place but fell off his horse and never got there."

She smiled faintly. "He's just trying to spare your pride, I think. He knew how important it was to you to stand up to Philip but—"

"—he also knows what a poor shot I am," he finished for her. "At least, that's what he thinks he knows. I could have hit Philip if I'd wanted to. I just didn't want to live the rest of my life with his blood on my hands. I shot over his head on purpose. Daniel knew I didn't want to kill him. And in spite of what he thinks, I don't really think Philip was going to—"

"No, Henry," Julia interrupted. "William and John had heard talk. Philip intended to put a bullet through your heart with his first shot." She shuddered. "And Daniel had no intention of letting you stand there and simply take Philip Colton's bullet. Since we're engaged and going to be family, he told my brothers everything. He rode over to Potter's field before anyone else got there and climbed one of those big oaks that

stand on either end of the dueling ground and waited. He figured no one would spot him because you'd all be distracted with what was going on on the ground. There'd be no reason for anyone to look up in the top of a tree."

"How did he know which way I was going to face? I didn't even know that myself until Matthew drew out the white stone."

"He didn't know. He only hoped Matthew would win the drawing so you could choose your position. He figured you'd face south since you were defending the colored bard who lives south of here. He knows you well, Henry, almost as well as I do. And if you hadn't faced south, he was going to shoot Philip in the back and take his chances. Thank God he saved you, no matter how." She let the shawl drop from her shoulders as she rose up on her toes and pulled his face down to hers.

For several moments he forgot all about duels and brothers and peddlers as she kissed him.

When it was over and he was able to think, he wondered if she had lost her mind. They had seldom been alone together, never without a chaperone one room or buggy seat away. They had exchanged brief kisses of greeting and parting, but nothing like this.

Looking down at her face, he contemplated how sweet it would be to kiss her again, to leave all earthly cares behind and let nature take its course. He wanted to, more than anything else in the world, to defy death, if only

for a few moments, and celebrate life . . .

With a Herculean effort he stepped away from her. Talk of the duel, the noisy party, and the night had all combined to turn their heads. He picked up her shawl and shook it free of dead leaves and pine needles before handing it back to her. When she stepped back to throw it over her shoulders, he could see, even in the dim lantern light, that she was blushing. "I think we'd better go back before we're missed," he said, and seeing a pine twig still attached to the fringe of her shawl, he reached over and shook it off. With the wafting air, her fragrance enveloped him, and he smiled. Why Daniel and Robert would not admit the truth, even to him, he could not imagine. Nor did he care. He had come to the peddler's grave with a heavy heart and was leaving with an impatient one. It was a joyous transformation.

Taking her arm, he led her through the iron gate and down the hillside. He would find out all the details later, would thank Daniel for saving his life, even over his proclamations of innocence. The tiny nagging doubt in his mind he chalked up to a week of total confusion, a week of waiting for an answer to materialize that would make sense.

Now there was only one thing to wait for. Another sunrise, another sunset, and the snuffing of a bedside candle.

The wedding of Henry Robin-

son and Julia Harmon took place on a golden morning in October under a large white oak tree beside the home of Julia's birth. The wedding was notable for two things: birds and tears, both present in large numbers and both occurring in unexpected places.

A raucous assemblage of crows cawed off and on during the ceremony itself. Henry was barely aware of them, looking into Julia's eyes and promising her his undying love and devotion. It was a promise he never intended to break, no matter what the future held. Taking notice of an air river of birds overhead, Henry vowed as well never to leave the soil of his birth and those who had shared his life for his first twenty-two years. Finally, as if to relieve the sober exchanging of vows, one of the barn cats had blundered into the last part of the ceremony with a cardinal, red as priests' robes, clutched in its jaws. Henry fancied later, over wedding cake, that the incident would be talked about for years. The minister's solemn proclamation, "what God hath joined together," had been accompanied by a shriek from Anna, Daniel's oldest daughter, who dropped her bouquet and pursued the flash of red feathers and gray fur. Daniel, who had pursued the child, came back to the completed ceremony to announce that the bird was now free even if the groom was not. Everyone had laughed, although Henry realized that Daniel, whose eyes were faintly red and swollen, must

have either been drunk or shedding tears during the ceremony.

Julia's mother had cried with some animation; his own, in the course of the afternoon, had wiped away an occasional tear, and Robert, when Titus had been handed his freedom papers and a small satchel of clothing and money, had wept like a baby. Even Julia's tears, shed alternately with her parents, her female friends, and him, were no surprise. When the day's festivities were finally drawing to a close and Julia embraced her mother beside the waiting carriage, Henry had little hope of staunching the flow before they reached their honeymoon destination.

In fact the tears stopped shortly after the bride left her mother's arms. On the ride to their cottage Julia chatted quietly about how much the day had meant to her, this golden day that she had dreamt of all her life. She spoke of how they must now put the past behind them and think of nothing but the home they would share and the sons and daughters who would join them there. Henry had nodded at all the right moments and even noticed the slight blush that accompanied mention of their progeny, but his mind was elsewhere.

Never in his life had he seen Daniel cry. Today he had seen it twice, once in view of everyone and once in private, with just his daughter at his side. Henry had found them in an upstairs bed-

room, Daniel sitting on the bed clutching a bottle of champagne and Anna alternately dabbing at his cheeks with a handkerchief and stroking his back. Henry had closed the door without being detected and gone back down to the party, but it was a scene he would never forget. When Daniel, standing tall and dry-eyed, if somewhat unsteady, at the end of it all, had shaken his hand and wished him godspeed to the honeymoon cottage, Henry's unease became even more acute. The remark was delivered with tame and lackluster formality, a courtesy from a brother he did not recognize.

Not until the lights of the town began to appear did Henry succeed in putting the events of the day behind him. When, tying up the horses, he and Julia discovered a lamp already burning inside their cottage, he smiled to himself in the dark. Daniel had either ridden at breakneck speed and done it himself or, more likely, had arranged for someone in town to add this homey touch to their wedding night. Whatever the source of his sorrow, Daniel had overcome it enough to continue the celebration without even being present. It was a thoughtful act, and this, in addition to a lengthy kiss from Julia after he set her down inside the cottage, served to banish all worries from his mind.

She saw the piano immediately and ran to it. When Henry returned from dropping their bags in the bedroom, she was stroking

the smooth cherrywood and making little noises of joy.

"Do you like it?" he asked and sat down beside her on the bench. It was a rhetorical question, designed to incite another outpouring of affection.

"Oh, Henry, it's gorgeous," she said and delivered the kisses he had been hoping for. She lifted the key cover and jumped off the bench simultaneously. "I've just got to play it for a minute, darling. But not with this on."

She flung the black cloak off her shoulders and over an armchair next to the piano. Sitting down again on the bench, she pushed up the sleeves of her burgundy dress and squeezed her fingers into fists. "My fingers are so cold," she said and thrust her hands under her armpits for a moment. "But I'm trying it anyway. You'll forgive me if I'm bad?"

"Of course," Henry said and smiled at her excitement. "You'll have plenty of time to practice after tonight." It was a mild hint, and she understood and blushed shyly. The gesture only served to increase Henry's desire. He put one hand on her back and began caressing her. Boldly, or perhaps not so boldly since she was now his wife, he slid his fingertips under the edge of her dress and felt the outline of her shoulder blade.

"Here goes," she breathed and stretched both hands over the keyboard. As she proceeded with a Bach invention, Henry's roving hand came to a standstill. He swallowed and watched her arms

pumping up and down over the keys.

"Julia," he said, realizing that he would not get an answer right away because she could never play and speak at the same time, "how did you get those scratches on your arms?"

She continued the invention, her head bobbing rhythmically to match the motion in her fingers.

While she played, Henry prepared the Robinson toast. Going into the kitchen, he found a bottle of his father's scuppernon wine in the dry sink immersed in a bucket of cold water. The glasses had been set on the pastry table with a battered red rose between them. Henry recognized the rose as one of his mother's late bloomers and looked around for a note from Daniel, giving best wishes or perhaps offering a bawdy suggestion but there was nothing. Listening to Julia's precise counterpoint, he poured the drinks and carried them back into the parlor.

"It's lovely," she said as she struck the last notes of the piece. "Oh, Henry." She kissed him again, holding his face in her hands. "I can never thank you enough."

He nodded, smiling weakly. Taking one of her arms, he ran his fingers down one of the scratches. "I haven't seen these before."

"Of course not," she said and inspected them herself. "Do you think I wanted to display them on my wedding day? I should nev-

er have helped Mama cut the roses for our reception. I was afraid this one was getting corrupted." She ran her finger along an angry scratch. "Mama doctored them with sweet oil, and they're much better. But I just had to keep them covered. They're horrible."

"They'll heal," Henry said and taking her arm, he kissed the area of her injury. Lifting one of the glasses from the top of the piano, he handed it to her along with the rose from the pastry table.

Later, waiting in the kitchen while Julia changed into her night things, Henry discovered a parcel on top of the pie safe. It was crudely wrapped in newspaper with a pine cone branch laid across the top. Inside he found a green glass sugar and creamer set. Certain of one of Daniel's practical jokes, he prepared for some ribald comment as he opened the folded note from the creamer. It said simply, "Titus," spelled out in huge block letters. Unable to contain his delight, he knocked on the bedroom door. When Julia finally admitted him, still discreetly covered with a white robe, she was overjoyed as well. They put the set on the bedside table and speculated about who Titus had gotten to spell out his name. Henry felt a brief surge of his emancipation sentiment, but Julia smiled and took his hand and it passed. He took off his coat and shoes and sat down on the bed next to his bride.

Much later, when the gibbous

moon had risen above the tall black pines, Henry reached over and turned out the lamp next to the bed. For several minutes or several hours, he had been kissing Julia. First her lips, then tiny kisses all over her face, then down her throat and into the little hollow at the base of her neck.

Now, with steady fingers, he reached up and removed the combs and pins from her hair, and it tumbled down her back and shoulders like a shield. In no mood for shields, he gathered the hair into one long expanse down her back. Even so, one impediment remained. After opening the tiny pearl buttons down the front of her gown, he slid the snow white garment off her shoulders and then caught his breath. There, just below her right collarbone, was an oval bruise, dark and purple and vivid even in the moonlight.

"Darling," he whispered and traced the outline of it with his fingertips. She pulled the gown quickly back over the discolored flesh.

"Awful, isn't it? I was hoping you wouldn't be able to see it. At least not tonight."

She got up and looked around the room. "I got it running into the door frame a couple of nights ago. One night when I couldn't sleep. I'm not an expert at sleep-walking like you." Going to the bureau in the corner, she opened each drawer until she found what she was looking for—a heavy woolen blanket. "Henry, if this were over the window, I mean,

even over the curtains so the moonlight can't—"

"Of course," he said and got up, nearly weak with relief. "You get back into bed and I'll fix it."

Going to the kitchen, he found the hammer he'd been using a few days earlier and, desperate to continue his wedding night, pulled a pair of nails out of the shelf brackets he'd put up with such care. After a few licks with the hammer, the blanket was in place over the window and the bedroom was plunged into total darkness.

Feeling his way slowly with his bare toes, he came back across the room. "I'm over here, Henry," Julia said, and there was something new in her voice, something that made him move with such speed that he dropped the hammer on the bedside table without thinking of the green

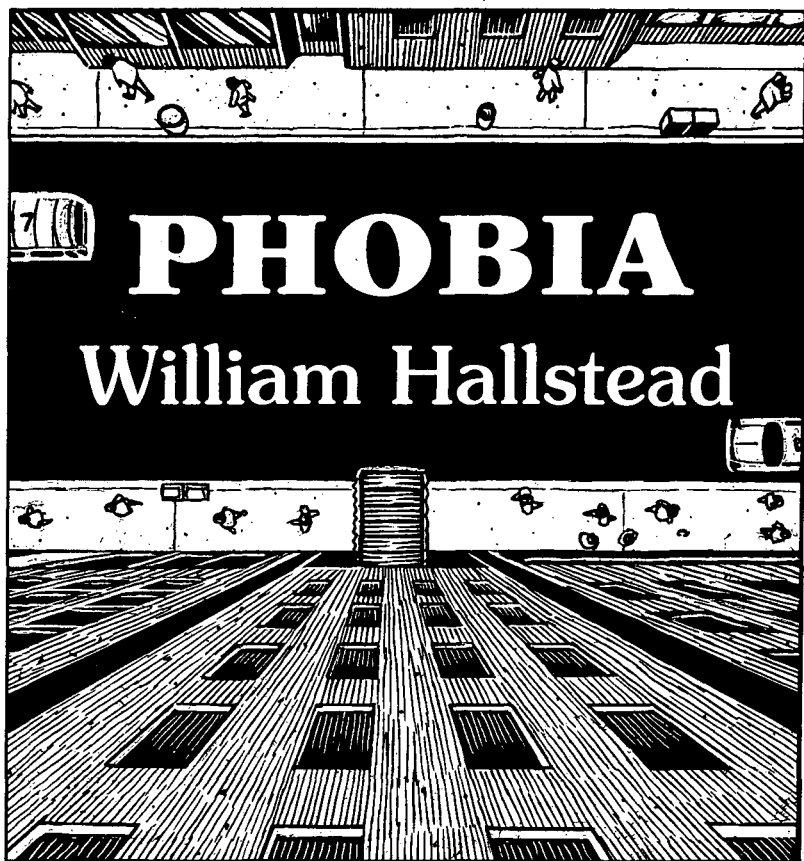
glass sugar and creamer set. The wedding gift, which had probably cost Titus a tenth of everything he had, was smashed into several pieces. His ardor temporarily dampened, Henry sat down on the bed. "He probably spent five dollars on that."

Bending over, he picked up one of the jagged pieces and ran his fingers carefully over the raised design. "Do you know what five dollars means to someone who's only got fifty in his pocket?"

"Fifty-one," Julia said and took the broken glass out of his hands. "Counting the dollar I gave Robert."

The remark was somehow unsettling to Henry, an echo of something distasteful, but at the moment, he could not recall what. Feeling the brush of Julia's gown as it left her shoulders, he gave up trying.

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“Oh, Gawd, Mitch! You shoulda seen your face up there!” Henry Stanhope dissolved into giggles. I cringed as a couple of late night strollers stared our way. “You son of a bitch, you told me the restaurant was only a few floors up.”

But it had been at the very top of the John Hancock Center, one hundred petrifying floors above Chicago. I hadn’t been able to eat anything more than tea and toast—and that with my back to the windows. Couldn’t wait to get down to street level again, hands shaking, knees rubbery, legs close to giving way altogether.

My problem—one of two—is acrophobia, fear of heights. Not just uneasiness. Sweat-popping, near-paralyzing, panic-threshold terror when I’m higher than three or four floors. My other problem stemmed from that one: Henry Stanhope enjoyed cruelty. He got a bang out of my altitude hangup. Maybe because I’m tall and lean while Stanhope



was short and dumpy. I have hair. Stanhope was getting bald. Whatever the cause of his sadistic behavior, he never let up.

So why were we in Chicago together when we both lived and worked in Baltimore? The National Conference on Advanced Advertising Techniques. We had been sent here by Moody and Rusch Advertising, Inc. Stanhope was vice president, and I was chief copy writer. In the corporate pecking order he was my boss. Which put me in a bind. Sue my boss for harassment because I was scared of heights?

So I put up with his jokes. "It's not the long fall that kills you, Mitch. It's the sudden stop!" Heard that one maybe ten times. "As the jumper said when he dropped past the second floor, 'All right so far!'" Heard that maybe twenty times.

Stanhope's twisted fun had been verbal until tonight. Oh, there had been that presentation luncheon back in Baltimore last June in the revolving restaurant thirteen floors above Lombard Street. He seated me right next to the windows, and he sat at the other end of the table wearing a huge grin while I struggled through my part of the agenda. I don't remember a word I said. My brain was paralyzed by the realization that only a foot or two behind me, separated from me by only a thin pane of glass, were one hundred thirty feet of empty air.

Oddly, it's not the empty air by itself that terrorizes me. ("It's not the—hee hee—long fall . . .") In fact, I have no fear at all in a jet liner thirty thousand feet above God's green earth. That's so detached it's like looking down at a map. No, what throws me into a stomach-churning heartquake is a mere glimpse of a building's downward taper to its seemingly tiny, unsubstantial base that a mere breeze could topple. Don't laugh. The tall ones sway in the wind. I can feel them sway in the wind.

"Yeah," Stanhope chortled as we neared our hotel, "you shoulda seen your face."

The son of a bitch took lip-smacking pleasure in the weaknesses of others. Got Joe Pincus fired because Joe couldn't resist taking home company pens and pencils—especially when Stanhope constantly laid them on the table next to Joe's desk. And it was Stanhope, I'm certain, who happened to mention to copy writer Abner Coale that he'd seen our company president entering the Hyatt with a woman whom Stanhope described as a dead ringer for Abner's wife. She wasn't, but Stanhope had a chuckle over what must have transpired at Abner's house that evening.

All of us who had to work with Stanhope hated the bastard, but when the bastard is your boss, what can you do?

"It's the sudden stop, Mitch. Hee hee." He pushed through the hotel's revolving door. We entered the nearly deserted lobby, a comfortable if slightly seedy lobby with places to sit and read. "It's one of the



few grand old hotels still in operation," he'd told me when he'd had his assistant make the reservations. "Real tile in the bathrooms, windows that actually open."

That had thrown me. I'd expected him to put us—me—in one of those dizzying chrome and glass towers with a lobby twelve stories high so he could hee-hee at my white knuckles as the hideously exposed glass elevator soared up the face of all twelve floors. I was scared to death of those things. This hotel, though, had more bearable, fully enclosed elevators. I tried not to think of the growing chasm just inches beneath my shoes as we rose to the fifteenth floor. My room was nearest the elevator. I gave Stanhope a barely civil good-night nod and inserted my key in the door.

"Oh, meant to tell you," he blurted. "I want to go over the Kitty Carsoner proposal with you before we turn in. It's in my room. I'll be right back." Stanhope's room was down the hall, then around the corner. I wasn't going to wait out here like a good dog at "stay." I opened the door, walked in, and shut it behind me. Let him knock.

I took off my coat and tie, sat on the bed, and began to untie my shoes. Knock he did. Review the Carsoner thing at this hour? It couldn't keep until morning? We weren't meeting with Kitty until next Friday. I pulled the door open and turned toward the table between the two windows. "We can spread it out on—"

That was when I felt something jab me in the back, just above my belt. "*Don't turn around.*" A harsh whisper in my left ear. "Just tell me where it is."

"Where *what* is?" The seriousness of this hadn't yet sunk in.

"If you've found it, you know. If you haven't, you don't need to know."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about." I started to turn around to get a look at this menacing whisperer. What had to be a pistol muzzle jabbed me hard.

"Don't turn around. Lock your fingers behind your head." Same hoarse whisper as if his vocal cords had been seriously damaged. "Where is it?" he demanded.

"Where is what?" What else was there to say? I hadn't the remotest idea what was going on here.

"Make it easy on yourself," he urged. "Hand it over, or I'll have to search the room."

"Go ahead. Search." I was surprised at my own boldness, but the unreality of this clod's intrusion seemed to take the edge off its menace.

"Not with you here waiting to jump me. Over to the window."

Oh my God.

The gun rammed into my kidney. "Don't make me use this. Over to the window."



Now fear rippled through me. This couldn't be happening. I caught his reflection in the window's ripply glass. Man in a black ski mask, just behind my left shoulder. "I told you—" Now my voice was an embarrassing squeak. "There's nothing here that—"

"Open the window."

"Why?"

"Just open it." The viperish hiss was right in my ear.

Trying to control trembling fingers, I thumbed open the double-hung sashes' old fashioned pivot lock. The lower sash had two metal finger slots. As I reached for them, I couldn't avoid looking beyond a narrow ledge out there, looking almost straight down.

Fifteen floors. One hundred fifty dizzying feet. My stomach constricted into a hard ball. I stumbled back. The gun muzzle dug in painfully. "Open the goddamn window!"

My hands shook. My palms were slick. "Look, I've got a real problem with heights. Why don't I just stay in the bathroom while you do whatever you—"

"I don't give a damn about your problem. I've got my own. *Now, open that window!*"

I prayed that it was stuck shut, glued tight with the revarnishing of decades. It wasn't. The sash slid smoothly upward. I shrank back from the incoming gust of humid August air, from the canyon-bottom street sounds that rode in with it.

"Now," he grated in my ear, "step out there."

The floor tilted. I lost my balance. Grabbed the sill to catch myself. Swallowed bile that erupted in my throat. My legs were cold rubber. My gut congealed into ice.

His free hand slammed down between my shoulder blades. He shoved. I almost toppled through the open window.

"Out on the ledge."

Impossible. The concrete strip just below window level looked no wider than a foot and a half. I recoiled into the gun muzzle's hard jab. "I can't do that."

"Hell you can't. Get out there, or I'll drop you right here. One way or another, I'm searching this room without you in the way."

Would he actually shoot me? Wouldn't the sound bring people running? Maybe not if the gun was small caliber and held close to muffle the blast. Would he take that risk? Depended on what he was looking for. A previous guest must have left it for him, and I'd gotten here before this guy did. A parcel of hot jewelry? Maybe a kilo or two of cocaine? Whatever it was, the bastard was ready to kill for it.

Against every instinct, fighting every reflex that impelled me back from the gaping window, I managed to get my right leg across the low sill and out on the ledge.

"That's a start," said the growl in my ear. "Now the rest of you."



I bent the outside leg, knelt on the gritty concrete. Then, fighting a near-paralyzing wave of panic, I slid across the sill and lay flat on the hard ledge. He shut the window.

The horrendous impact of where I was hit me like a fist. Awash in hot sweat, I pushed up against the building's face below the sill. I didn't dare look to my right, to look into space—then down fifteen floors to toy cars and antlike people in the street that waited for my screeching plummet off this impossibly narrow perch.

But I did look down, the way you have to look at a loathsome spectacle though you don't want to. I peered out, then down—and the building lurched. I felt myself slide inch by inch toward the abyss.

My fingernails clawed the unyielding surface. Found no grip. Skated across the concrete. My right leg slipped free, dangled in open air over a hundred and fifty feet of nothing, threatened to pull the rest of me off the ledge to whistle downward, to smash against the distant pavement. I was struck by that crazy impulse that hits acrophobes when, despite all precautions, we find ourselves high enough above ground to feel panic's hot grab: *Go ahead. Jump. Get it over with.*

That insane urge struck me now as I groveled on the ledge, one leg dangling in space, with gravity's persistent pull telling me to let go, to let it rush me down, down . . .

The building wasn't moving. I was suffering an attack of vertigo. I managed to drag my leg back up on the ledge. Then I dared raise my head to look through the window.

No one in the room. I could see through the bathroom's open door that he wasn't in there either.

I was locked outside an empty room. Could I break the big pane of glass in the bottom sash? The thought of untying a shoe, then slamming it into the window brought hot sweat anew. The reaction to hitting the window surely would topple me backward into yawning space.

Was I truly *locked* out here? I didn't dare stand up to check the pivot lock on top of the sash. There were no finger slots on this side, of course, but there was room between sill and sash to wedge in the tips of my fingers. I managed that from a prone position, petrified to raise my body higher. I stiffened my fingers, pried upward—and slipped. My fingertips flew free. I lunged backward toward the edge of my narrow perch. I barely managed to slam my left hand down on the concrete lip in time to check my rolling off. But that moment of terror had been worth it. I found that I'd managed to raise the window a quarter inch, enough to give me real purchase. I raised the sash cautiously, peered in on hands and knees. Then I crawled back into my room.

I collapsed on the rug, exhausted, leg and arm muscles twitching uncontrollably, mouth dry.

And I heard a rapping at the door.



I stumbled to my feet. "Wh—who is it?"

"It's Henry, Mitch. With the Carsoner proposal. Like I told you."

I let him in.

"What in the *hell*," he said with eyes bulging, "happened to you?"

I told him, and he insisted on calling hotel security. A few minutes later a sepia version of Raymond Burr arrived to take a lot of notes and urge me to be more careful of whom I let in my room. I was way ahead of him on that.

He left, I begged off on the proposal review, and I slept hardly at all.

Stanhope and I had agreed to meet at the elevator at eight A.M. sharp. I got there early, which gave me a few moments to listen to clankings and bangings in the shaft. Ancient machinery having a moment of revolt. I wasn't so sure I wanted to—

"Morning!" Stanhope, all slicked down and natty in boardroom blue. He gave me a smirky nod. I nodded back, then jerked my head toward the elevator.

"Sounds to me like they're having some trouble."

Stanhope shrugged. Then he grinned—and said the most chilling words I'd ever heard.

"Don't turn around. Just tell me where it is." All that in a hoarse whisper. In *the* hoarse whisper that had terrified me last night.

"Jesus H. Christ!" I burst out. "That was *you*!"

He dissolved into thigh-slapping guffaws. "My God, Mitch, you should have seen yourself! What a kick! You were—you were—" He burst out laughing again.

"The gun," I croaked. "You didn't actually—"

He flipped out his Mont Blanc pen and hunched into a mock shooting stance. "Mightier than the sword." He fell into another giggle fit.

The ski mask. The room with easy-opening windows and a ledge. The son of a bitch had carefully planned it all.

I was infuriated. I didn't know whether to spit in his face, scream at him, or slug him. I was ready to do all three.

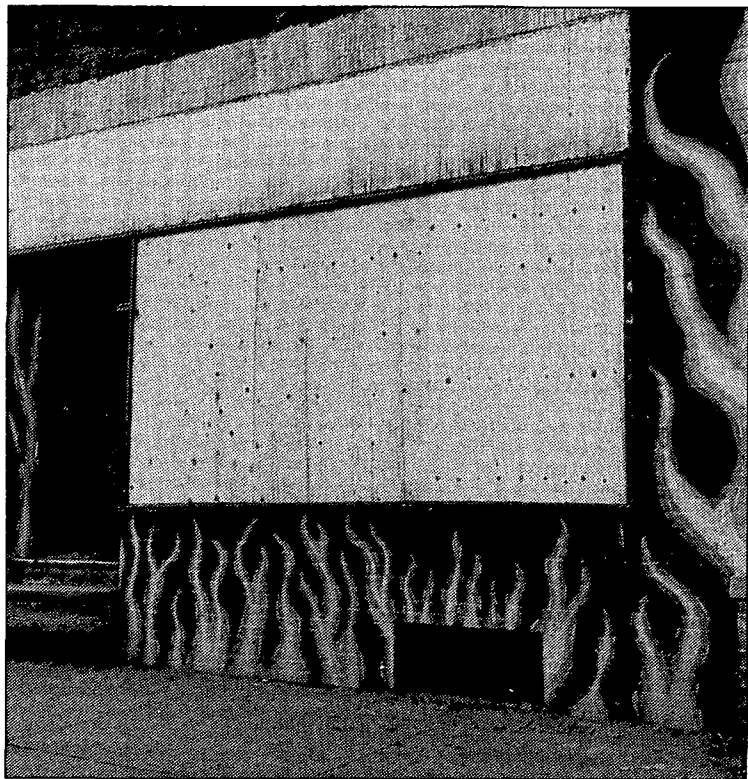
Then, behind him, the elevator door slid open. Still laughing himself to tears, he eased backward toward the car. But there was no car. Just the open door, then gaping black nothing.

"Henry!" I grabbed for him. He ducked away, reared back—and found only air. He seemed to hang there, arms flung out, mouth frozen in a horrified O. Then he was gone, his screech of terror trailing him down the shaft.

It was then that I gave in to the strongest and surely the most unworthy impulse I've ever had. I stepped right up to the edge of the elevator opening and looked straight down into the diminishing howl. And I shouted:

"All right so far, Henry?"

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Flamed, apparently. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

EMIMIA

Bentley Dadmun

The problem with living on a wooden boat in the middle of a grove in the middle of a pasture is disenchantment.

The boat's, not mine.

Out of its element, in terminal exile, the boat withers and cries out for its life's blood. It needs to feel briny water flowing under its hull. But it's not to be. Mast, sails, and rudder were amputated years ago, and my boat will never again know the feel of deep water pulling at her hull. She is going to rot and die in this grove, and all I can do is delay the inevitable.

I dug out what I hoped was the last of the rot and filled the void with an epoxy goop guaranteed to last fifty years. Since I'm sixty-two, I'm not too concerned about the guarantee.

With a paint-encrusted putty knife I smoothed the goop out, gathered everything up and crammed it into an old ammo box, and slid the box into the space under the left cockpit seat.

My chore finished, I assumed I deserved a reward and had prepared for this by stashing a bottle of reward in the freezer of my little refrigerator.

With a liter of Lancer's rosé firmly in hand, I went back on deck and poured until only surface tension kept the wine from overflowing the mug. My current mug, until I break or misplace it, one of which is inevitable, is a large white porcelain thing with a picture of Ayn Rand stamped on it.

As I bent to lap at the wine, I heard crackling and crunching sounds in the brush, which meant either I had visitors or an inept bear was floundering around in the grove. I slurped wine, leaned back in my deck chair, and waited.

Helen Glidden burst out of the trees, glared at the boat, and lurched forward. A large square-faced woman with a tangled mop of hair tinted to match the blue in her protruding eyes, Helen lived for God and gardening. I don't think I've ever seen her dressed in anything but denim overalls and cheap leather boots.

She clambered up the rough pine stairs and performed a controlled fall into the cockpit. "Put down that devil's drink, and come with me," she demanded between gulps of air. "Mildred is waiting for us."

I smiled politely and said, "And good morning to you, too, Helen. Maybe you'd better sit a while, your face is the color of raw beef."

"I'm just fine, my color results from a summer of hard toil in the fields doing the Lord's work. Now come, Mildred is waiting, poor thing."

I sat up. "What's the matter with Mildred?" I asked.

"It was she who volunteered to stay with God and watch over a poor lost soul."

"Stay with God? Poor lost soul? Helen, what the hell are you yattering about?"

She clambered down the steps, glared up at me, and pointed west. "Mildred is waiting."

I muttered oaths, gulped down my Lancer's, belched mightily, and trotted after her.

Helen force-marched us out of the grove, across the west side of the pasture, and into the woods. We blundered along, more or less following the river, bulling our way through brush, high wet grass, and weed-choked creeks and ignoring cow-worn trails, open fields, and other paths of less resistance. Her Lord is a demanding sort.

We engaged in this folly for the better part of twenty minutes, then stumbled into a small clearing that smelled of fresh-dug dirt and smashed dandelions and found Mildred Beedy perched serenely on a large rock, shaking dirt off the roots of a handful of wildflowers. Mildred is a lean, narrow woman in her seventies. She has predatory blue eyes, a truly grand Roman nose, and dull gray hair that lies on her skull like seaweed on a rock.

She stood up, shoved the plants into a black garbage bag, waved a hand at me, and said, "Over here, Harry. Helen stumbled on it while digging up dandelions."

I walked through the weeds to where she was standing and looked down at several rib bones, a femur, and one other bone, perhaps from an arm.

A human arm.

I squatted and dug into the soft ground with my hands. Mildred squatted beside me and held out a gardener's trowel. "Instead of sitting on a rock you could have dug this up," I said.

"Not on your life. I do not dig up old graves."

"What makes you think I do? Why the hell did Helen invade my privacy just to bring me to some old gravesite?"

Mildred gave me an indignant look and said, "Why, you have a degree in history, and you were a teacher. I should think you'd get tired of roosting in that boat of yours, doing nothing but reading and drinking wine."

"Amen," Helen sang.

I smothered a brilliant retort and kept digging. In ten minutes I had several piles of bones. Ribs, vertebrae, long bones and short bones, and, off to the side the dirt-packed skull. A piece of cloth, perhaps once red, fell apart in my hands when I picked it up. I dug more and nicked something with the trowel, grubbed around, and lifted out a dirt-encrusted piece of jewelry, which I slipped into my pocket.

Now that the buck had been passed, Mildred and Helen lost interest and were digging up more wildflowers and dandelions. I clapped dirt off my hands and thought about stuff.

The grave was deep enough to cover a body with maybe a foot to spare. It certainly wasn't that infamous six feet under, and there was no evidence of shroud, body bag, or coffin.

Things change, but we were miles from town and the nearest dwelling was The Farm, maybe two miles away. I was willing to bet that conditions had been about the same when the body

was rolled into this shallow grave. The river was about thirty tough yards through the woods, and maybe that was meaningful.

I shook the dirt off a garbage bag, packed the bones in it, tied it off, and stood up. Helen and Mildred, their arms full of dandelions, moving like shy, curious birds, crossed the clearing, sat down by the grave, and crammed the plants into an already full bag. Mildred wiped her forehead with a dirty hand, glanced into the hole, and said, "What are you going to do, Harry?"

"I'm not sure." I hefted the bag. "Probably give the bones to the police."

Helen said, "Oh Lord, dear Lord."

And Mildred said, "Well, if you insist on making that mistake, Harry, make sure you do not, I repeat, do not mention our hand in this. The last thing we want is to have a bunch of arrogant policemen asking questions."

I smiled. "I don't think making a few gallons of dandelion wine is against the law. You don't have to be concerned."

"We are aware of that, Harry, it's the time. Those people will take up all kinds of time, making us fill out reports, making us answer intimate questions."

"And treating us like we were children," sniffed Helen. "That's the worst part, being treated like a child, and a not too intelligent child at that."

I sighed and shook my head. "Listen," I said. "What we have here is a body, an old body per-

haps, but a body nevertheless. If you didn't want to get involved, why the hell did you come and get me?"

"Because it's the Lord's wish," said Helen. "This poor dear soul, shoved into that shallow grave, the family wondering all these years." She tapped the bag with her finger. "The Lord sent me to fetch you, Harry, so that you may set things right."

"Set things right?"

"To see that the individual is returned to the bosom of family, buried in a proper grave, in a proper place," Mildred said.

"And to have a man of God say proper words over the grave," Helen said.

"Why not a woman of God?"

Mildred snorted. "Don't be flip. We did our part; now we leave it to you. You're suited for the task. And be sure you leave us out of it." With that they gathered up their bags and tools and marched into the woods. I lingered awhile in the small sunwashed clearing, listening to the birds sing, smelling the fresh-turned earth, and counting options.

I took the easy way back to the grove, dumped the bag in the cockpit, went below, and returned with a pan of soapy water and a scrub brush. I dropped the piece of jewelry I'd found into the water, let it soak awhile, then scrubbed off the dirt. When I was done, I laid it in my palm and stared at it.

It was a jeweled clip. I remembered my mother had had sever-

al. Large ornate things that held her long dark hair in place and sparkled in the sunlight. But Mother never had one like this. An intricate dance of gold filigree laced with rubies and jade and worth more than my mother dared dream of. It lay in my palm, heavy and warm and demanding.

Another mug of wine was in order, for digging up graves, however shallow, and cleaning antique treasures is thirsty business and at my age I should keep hydrated. So I dithered around a bit, drank a bit, and finally, reluctantly, dragged the bag of bones to me, felt around, and pulled out the skull.

I held it out like I had once watched an inept actor do in a college rendition of *Hamlet* and tried to think of a classy line or two. Nothing came, so I turned the skull and contemplated the small round hole toward the back of it, just above where the left ear would have been.

All the years in the ground had packed the skull with dirt. With a spoon and a few whacks against the deck I got it all out, kneaded the small moist pile with my fingertips, and found it. A .22, probably. A small thing, flattened at one end, the bullet was; unlike the jeweled clip it weighed next to nothing. Velocity was all.

What had the woman been doing when this small piece of lead sped into her brain? Perhaps, like Mildred and Helen, she'd been picking dandelions, or dancing playfully about that little clearing. How old had she been? Who

had loved her? Who had hated her?

Who had killed her?

I hauled everything into the cabin, putting the sack of bones on the left bench seat of the settee, the jeweled clip and bullet in an empty Ivory soap box that I set on the top shelf of the tiny cabinet above the sink. I made an early supper of baked beans, mixed veggies, a handful of supplements. I toasted my guest with a glass of milk and ate. After supper I built a fire in my tiny woodstove, for the warmth of the perfect spring day had fled with the coming of night, and settled down to read.

I dropped out of life about twenty years ago when I was a young and foolish forty-three, having decided that the organized, externally directed life I was leading had turned me into something I didn't like, a somewhat robotlike being getting pulled this way and that and giving off a strong odor of compliance. So I shucked everything, including wife, and headed inward, toward inner direction, self-control, self-reliance. And incurred the wrath of wife, peers, and the neighborhood priests and priestesses. The price. Always the price to pay.

And now I sit, in the middle of a cow pasture, in a small, rotting boat, reading history magazines by the light of eight candles, my only company a pile of stained, dirty bones.

Rationalization is a wonderful thing. It keeps old men walking the path.

The front half of the second floor of the barn is a huge multipurpose room. It has a kitchen and dining area and, toward the back, a lounge containing several islands of living room furniture that the destitute residents managed to salvage when their lives fell apart. Two meals, breakfast and supper, are served. I rarely attend, as eating with forty or fifty other people, especially talkative geezers, usually drives me up that proverbial wall.

I made an exception this morning, though, for most of the people residing at the farm are lifelong residents of the county and have an encyclopedic knowledge of its people. Sandwiched between an ancient hump-backed crone with pinkish hair and desperate eyes and Andrew Gordon, the world's greatest authority on everything trivial, I shuffled along the serving line listening to Gordon spew forth nonsense. My chipped, grayish plate loaded down with a poached egg and two cups of coffee, I cut in front of an eightyish gentleman and nabbed the last seat at the largest table. I plunked down and smiled at everybody, and was generally ignored while they romped in their food like starved voles.

I smiled, made chitchat, and generally behaved myself for the ten minutes it took to eat my egg and drink one cup of coffee. Then I pulled the clip out of my sweat-shirt pocket and held it up like a cop holds up a badge. "Have any of you ever seen this before?"

They shuffled around digging into pockets or purses, slipped on glasses, and peered at my treasure. It got passed about, and Kate Morrow, a crusty matron with chemical hair and methane eyes said, "It's old, like the ones my mother wore when she was young. You rob some poor mother's grave, Harry?"

I managed a smile and sipped my coffee with a steady hand. "Actually, Kate, I picked the pocket of a priest."

"Wouldn't surprise me a bit. You'd try to pick the pocket of God herself."

I reclaimed my treasure and wandered, lighting at several more tables where the jeweled clip was admired but not recognized. Then, knee-deep in wet babble, I waded out of the lounge and out of the barn.

My only transportation is a mountain bike, a pretty gray and black thing, lumpy with small nylon bags carrying stuff like tools and tirepatch kits. A few weeks ago I traded the panniers in on a red plastic trailer with a yellow canvas top. It's made for road bikes to carry kids, but it's also handy to haul home wine and food and seems better suited to carry such loads than panniers.

I retrieved the bike from the barnyard and pedaled the seven miles to town. It was a cool spring day, and the air was thick with the smells of nature gearing up. A thick, sharp-edged black cloud was flowing in from the west and

would soon be dumping chill water on budding plants and old men on bicycles.

At the gloomy end of an alley off Main Street is Gretchen's, a small, pleasantly shabby restaurant catering to senior citizens. Gretchen runs a lot of tabs a week or so before Social Security checks arrive, and I suspect a good deal of her soup-of-the-day is ladled out gratis.

Gretchen's has been in continuous operation since the thirties and shows it. A battered wooden counter runs along the left wall, fenced in by a squad of tired, squeaky stools that have supported far too many fat rumps. Along the right wall stand six high-backed oak booths. Toward the back in the middle of the floor is a huge potbellied woodstove that eats three foot logs and leaks birch smoke into a room heavy with the smells of fried meat and fresh-brewed coffee.

I set my bike against the back wall and slid into the rear seat of the last booth. As usual, Gretchen and her daughter were behind the counter. A minute later Gretchen plunked down across from me and pushed a mug of coffee over.

A lean, stringy woman about my age with a long, sharp face and limp salt and pepper hair, Gretchen has owned the restaurant since the sixties, having inherited it from her mother, Gretchen the First.

She looked at me, smiled, and shook her head. "You know, Harry, I don't think I've ever seen

you that you weren't sweating. Why the hell don't you sell that bike for scrap and buy a car, save a bundle in deodorant and laundry bills? You might put some weight on, too. Christ, you're as lean and sinewy as a demented weasel."

I sipped my coffee and smiled. "When you win Megabucks, you can buy me one. One of those big vans with a couch and bar in the back. We can drive down to Key West and watch the sunsets."

"I win the Megabucks, I'll go by myself. Don't need some leaned-out, sweaty old man hanging on my arm."

"Probably a smart move." I slid my cup to one side and laid the clip on the table. "Ever see this before?"

Gretchen picked it up and turned it in her fingers. "It's old, that's for sure. I've seen some like it but don't think I've ever laid eyes on this one until now. I'd say handmade a couple of generations ago. A gift for a special lady. Where did you get it?"

"A chance find. Might have been worn by a local years back." Then I said, "You've been here all your life. Ever hear of anyone disappearing?"

Gretchen stared at me a moment. "Disappearing? What the hell do you mean, disappearing?"

"Just what I said. Have you ever heard of anyone disappearing? Coming up missing?"

"When?"

I shrugged, pretended to think, and said, "Oh, say thirty, forty years ago."

That got me a long look and silence. We stared at each other, and finally Gretchen waved the jeweled clip in my face and said, "Harry, just what the hell are you up to now?"

"I read an article in a history magazine about missing women. It's amazing how many women disappear, and no one knows what happened. I was curious and wondered if any people . . . women . . . from this town had disappeared."

She snorted and shook her head. "Harry, what's amazing is that you really expect me to believe that crap. First you slap my knuckles with a half pound of gold clip, and in the next breath you ask about missing women." She shook her head and smiled a hard, lipless smile. "I've known you for what? Almost ten years now, and I can tell when you're off on another one of your quests."

I picked up my coffee, leaned back in the booth, and waited. Finally she shook her head and began to run the tip of her finger through a puddle of spilled coffee. "Missing women. Missing women. Hmm, I can think of two: Mary Anderson, who turned up missing in the early forties, '42, I think. I was a youngster, but I remember my mama saying that Mary most likely headed out to California 'cause that's where all the men were. Anyways, she probably left voluntarily."

Gretchen's daughter yelled from behind the counter. Gretchen slowly turned, gave her a look

that would crack ice, and turned back to me.

"Christ on a stick. She drops out of school, lives with me rent free, I give her a job, and she treats me like I was maybe put on this poor sad earth to carry her around for life. I got news for that one."

She drained her coffee, gave her daughter one more cold stare, and turned back to me. "Emma Pearson was another one that went missing. Sometime in the fifties, don't know anything about that either, it was just something folks chatted about." She put her rough, scarred hands on the table and pushed herself up. "Anything comes of your quest, let me know. It would be worth a couple of meals to hear a good story."

"I'm not on any quest," I said, "just curious."

She gave me the same look she'd given her daughter. "Bull."

I left my bike against the back wall and, outfitted with a small thermos of Gretchen's coffee, walked up the steep, tree-lined hill to the college library. As usual, I saw several people I knew from the days when I taught at the college, and as usual we pretended not to see each other. Wonderful concepts, maturity . . . attitude.

I walked past the huge front desk over to research and dug around in the microfiche files until I found the back issues of the local paper from the fifties. I played with the machine, found the paper for the first week of

January, 1950, poured myself a cup of coffee, and waded in.

On the premise that a missing person would be significant news, I concentrated on the front page, occasionally dipping back to page two and three when it seemed to be a heavy news week, such as the Garden Club's annual art fair or the grand opening of a new bakery.

That's five hundred and twenty front pages for the decade if I had to spin them all past my tired old eyes.

I learned a hell of a lot I didn't especially care to know about the town, enhancing my deep conviction that most of us lead fairly empty lives and that, yes, Emma Pearson did disappear. August eighteenth, 1957.

The details were sketchy. Emma Pearson, age twenty, had been reported missing by her father, Randell Pearson. Her mother, Martha, had died the previous year. The next week's paper continued the story, stating that after an exhaustive investigation the authorities were clueless, Randell Pearson was devastated and ill, and the investigation continued.

The story died in five weeks. Emma was still missing. The authorities were still baffled, and Randell Pearson was dead of a stroke.

Betty Worthen is the village meter maid, a big, solid woman with a round cheerful face and small, crinkly blue eyes that have witnessed much of the hu-

man folly up close and personal. She patrols the streets with the dedication of a hungry shark and hands out tickets to any and all who fail to shove a dime into the gray metal demon grinning at them through the windshield.

I walked up behind her, put my arm around her wide, thick shoulders, and said, "Betty, you look like a woman who needs a bowl of soup."

She gave me a sideways look, glanced at her watch, and smiled. "Make it a double cheeseburger and a beer and you have a deal."

On the way I had to stop twice and wait while Betty wrote out tickets for expired meters. We finally got to Gretchen's and sat in a booth cluttered with dirty dishes, greasy silverware, and a forty-three cent tip.

Gretchen, who's paid a king's ransom in parking fines, cleared the table and waited on us with pursed lips and dead eyes. While we waited for her cheeseburger and my soup, I nodded toward Gretchen and said, "How does it feel to be on everyone's hit list."

Betty smiled. "Not everyone's; most play the game. Those that don't, well . . ."

Gretchen's daughter plunked our orders down and grimly stalked off. Betty immediately grabbed her burger and ripped out a sizable hunk with her wide, flat teeth. She washed it down with beer, burped, and said, "Okay, Harry, what do you want? Why the bribe?"

"I also want to slip you seventy-five dollars."

"Seventy-five? Christ, you must be in deep deep doodoo."

"No, I want you to see if you can dig up the records on Emma Pearson. She . . ."

"Disappeared way back in the fifties," Betty said.

"How did you know? That's a bit before your time."

She ripped off another hunk of cheeseburger. "When I'm not doing meters or arresting drunk college students, I put stuff on the computer and make backup tapes. Unsolved murders, of which there are three, kidnappings, disappearances, stuff like that, we always keep the paper. You never know. Anyway, I read it all. That woman will be on file until 2006. Now the big question is, what's your interest?"

Gretchen makes the best onion soup in the world and seals the bowl with a thick slab of semi-melted Swiss cheese. I dug away at the Swiss with my spoon, concentrating on it and not looking into Betty's eyes. "Well," I said gently, "for seventy-five dollars I was hoping to keep that to myself."

We ate in silence. Betty finished her cheeseburger and her beer and helped herself to my wine. Finally I said, "You want dessert, Betty?"

She sighed and shook her head. "No, I've done enough damage. Now all I want to do is lie under a tree in the common and take a nap."

She heaved herself out of the booth and put a hand on my shoulder.

"That lady has been missing for forty years. She's all but forgotten. For a hundred bucks I'll get you the paper and forget I gave it to you."

Two hours later I was lurking around the gazebo in the park on the common. Betty walked through, took my hundred dollars, and gave me a large brown envelope. When I pedaled out of the park, she was writing out a ticket on a white Volvo with Maine plates.

Emma Pearson had had pretty good teeth for someone born before fluoride. She had two fillings in a back-molar, and her left upper incisor had been broken and filed down. For the third time I picked up the yellowed, brittle dental record, its official red police stamp faded to a hazy outline, and compared it with the skull. I poured myself more wine, drank, picked up the skull again, and said, "Well, Emma, I'll see what I can do."

The next morning I walked across the pasture to the barnyard gate, wrestled the goddamn thing open, and got it closed again. As I pushed my bike out of the barn, I saw Annie walking toward me, so I climbed on the bike and aimed for the road at the other end of the barnyard.

"Harry, I know you see me, so stop for a moment, please."

Reluctantly I stopped and waited. Annie, the owner of The Farm and mayor of our community of destitute elders, is a retired vet-

erinarian. She is in her seventies, is handsome in a wrinkled, fleshy way, and has the instincts of a mink.

She stopped, turned away from me, and, hands on hips, surveyed the barn looming beside us. The house and barn are attached and form a sagging, three story pile of wood almost eighty yards long. Over fifty senior citizens live in the barn and in the old trailers and R.V.'s stuck haphazardly in the surrounding pastures. We heat with wood, as it's abundant and free. One winter equals over sixty cords of wood. It's nice that it's free. It's an epic miscarriage of all that's fair that I do most of the logging. But if I didn't, I would, like everyone else, have to part with ninety percent of my Social Security check.

Annie turned away from the barn, ran her fingers through her handcut slate gray hair, and said, "That goddamn eave has to be rebuilt ASAP. The rain is ruining the apartments."

"Calling one room an apartment is stretching it a bit, don't you think?"

She shot me an iron glare. "They're large rooms; don't try to push my buttons, Harry. The reason I stopped you, when are you going to start on the wood for next winter?"

I reared back and put a shocked look on my face. "Jesus, Annie, it's spring. Give my old bones a rest."

What Annie gave me was a gimlet smile. "Look, Harry, you

were still hacking away in the woods last November trying to fulfill your obligation. It is my suggestion that if you start now you won't have to labor in the cold."

"Annie," I said, "just what is the problem? You know the wood will get cut."

She looked around the barnyard. "Trouble. Money trouble, as usual. The barn repairs. Even with the residents doing most of the work, we can't afford the materials. You know how much a goddamn two by six board costs? Or a sheet of plywood? The barn needs major work, and I can't afford half of it without putting us all on bread and beans."

There was nothing to say to that, so I hauled out my treasure, handed it to her, and asked, "What do you think?"

She dug an abused pair of glasses out of her jacket and scrutinized the hair clip. "Where did you get this?"

"A payment . . . for services yet to be rendered."

She handed back the clip. "Old, handmade, probably one of a kind, perhaps a special gift to a loved one. What shenanigans are you up to now, Harry?"

"Not a thing. Just wanted to know if you'd ever seen it."

"No, and I'd remember something like that. If you're feeling generous, you may donate it to the cause. It'd buy a lot of lumber."

"Sorry, Annie, its value runs deeper than half-inch plywood."

"Well, then get in the goddamn

woods and start cutting, 'cause it's going to be a rough winter."

I pedaled through a cold drizzle to town. The countryside was an impressionistic montage of pale green. Despite the chilling drizzle that wandered down my chest I was feeling pretty good. Spring fever, I think. That yearly burst of contentment that brings a smile to one's face for no apparent reason other than that life is being renewed and that one has lucked out and survived another winter.

Maybe it wasn't spring fever, though. Maybe it was purpose. The human animal craves purpose, and direction. Purpose wards off the demons and soothes the manic id lurking in that fetid part of the mind that knows its own lack.

Gretchen put a cup of coffee in front of me and leaned against the booth. She fished a thin blue cigarette out of her stained dress pocket, lit the thing with a three inch flame from a Bic lighter, blew a jet of smoke over my head, and said, "You look like you just came from the doctor's and the s.o.b. charged you two hundred to tell you were going to die this afternoon."

"Tomorrow, he said I might last until tomorrow if I don't partake of any of your soup."

Gretchen looked down at me. "Sweat. You're sweating as usual, Harry. It's gonna be written on your stone. 'Here lies Harry. He sweated . . . a lot.'"

"On your next pass for bodies, could you drop off a carafe of wine? Your finest, of course."

"That would be the rosé, the two dollar a gallon stuff."

Purpose or not, I was snug and comfy in the old oak booth. So I avoided reality for a while and sipped bad wine, watched the other customers, and tried not to think about being old.

That yellowed, brittle police report mentioned several names. People who were questioned during the investigation, people who were acquainted with Emma Pearson. Nobody had known anything. Emma had simply disappeared, and everyone was mystified.

I brought out my official notebook, a dogeared thing with a yellow cover printed with an image of Popeye, and scanned the list of names I had copied from the police report. When Gretchen shuffled by with a large tray full of dirty dishes, I raised a finger and said, "Got a minute?"

She snorted. "Why, hell yes, Harry. I was walking by just hoping you would stop me so I could stand here and let this load sink me to the floor." She eased the tray onto the table and with a sigh settled in the opposite seat. "Whatcha got?"

I handed over my notebook, pointed at the list of names, and asked, "Know any of those people?"

Gretchen blew smoke off the wall, scanned the list, and nodded. "Well, let's see. Joseph Morgan . . . died last year of a stroke.

Was talking to Mike Krebs over at the hardware store. Mike said all of a sudden his face turned in to a wet bag, and he dropped like a stone.

"Nancy Wilcox, she used to be a regular in here. Down in Manchester now, at Golden Time rest home. Got Alzheimer's. Bet she's having a real golden time. Mary Davies, she's still around, lives over at Green Hill Apartments. Comes in every once in awhile, drinks more wine than you do, Harry. Ahh, let's see, Jack Folsom, dead of prostate cancer. Glad I don't have one of them things, bad enough having tits to worry about. And Samuel Dauer, he's still around, has diabetes, got his leg hacked off a few months ago, lives in a mobile home over on Prospect." She flipped the notebook closed and slid it back to me. "Some of those folks might have known Emma Pearson."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really?"

Gretchen smiled. "Yeah, really. Jesus, Harry, you do get into the damndest things."

I pocketed my notebook.

"Thank you, Gretchen."

"You take care, Harry." She stooped a bit, grabbed the heavy tray, hesitated, then with a soft grunt lifted the tray and headed for the big sinks behind the counter.

Green Hill Apartments is a U-shaped complex sitting on top of a small knoll at the east end of town. A one story brick and steel

building with smallish windows and a parking lot with a bunch of well-kept six- and eight-year-old Fords and Chevys sitting in it. Several of the windows had small gray satellite dishes bolted to them.

Two hundred channels beaming down from the cosmos.

I coasted down the walk reading mailboxes until I found one with a small white card hand-printed with M. DAVIES. After two minutes of pushing the little black button I concluded the doorbell didn't work and gave the brown, poorly painted door a few whacks with my knuckles.

The door slowly opened, and I faced a short, plump woman with a red face and blue eyes. She was draped in a stained white dress with red and yellow flowers printed on it. She had a remote gripped tightly in her thick hand, and she looked dubious, so before she closed the door in my face, I pasted on my very best smile and said, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Davies. My name is Harry Neal, and I wonder if I may talk with you. It's about someone you knew long ago, Emma Pearson."

She stared at me for several seconds, turned her head toward the sound of a man on television yelling earnestly about hemorrhoids, pointed the remote back into the room. Suddenly a sobbing woman was talking about having sex with her brother. Mrs. Davies stared into the room and slowly raised the remote again.

I cleared my throat and half yelled, "Mrs. Davies?"

She turned back to me and said softly, "Emma is, that is, she went missing forty years ago."

"I know. I was at the library reading old newspapers, and I came across the story. It piqued my curiosity, and I wondered if you remembered anything."

She turned and pointed, and the television started saying if only you would give one hundred dollars to the Children of Christ, the world might be saved. She clicked twice more, edging back into the apartment as she did so. I whacked the door frame and said loudly, "Mrs. Davies?"

"I just went to school with her. Is all, had algebra with her and maybe gym, I think. She was a dippy girl. Wrote poetry, was always talking about animal rights, for God's sake. I always thought she cared more for animals than people." Mrs. Davies edged farther back into her apartment.

I yelled into the dark room, "Who did she hang out with, Mrs. Davies?"

Her muffled voice came from the depths of that black space. "Well, she had plenty of boy-friends if I remember right. Used to be with Amos Brown a lot, and I think maybe Samuel Dauer around that time."

I nodded my thanks to the dark door and pedaled off.

Two hundred channels beaming down from the cosmos.

Samuel Dauer lived in a long, squared-off mobile home stuck on a sandy lot on the dead end of

Prospect Street, a quiet, dirty street on the west side of town. Clusters of stunted pine and ugly mounds of thick gnarly brush hemmed it in back and sides. A large deck swept out from the front door, making the back door down at the other end appear small and lonely.

Instead of stairs, a wide ramp coated with a rough sandpaper-like substance led to the deck. A small satellite dish was bolted to one of the support posts and pointed to the heavens.

A realtor's sign was stuck in the ground by the ramp. Over the FOR SALE was a SOLD sticker.

A big gray squirrel was thrashing away in a bird feeder stuck on a post near the treeline. Five or six small birds were flying above his head making a hell of a fuss, but the squirrel didn't seem worried. I walked up the ramp and gave the door several backhands. Maybe a minute later I heard a clunk. The polished brass knob turned, the door opened, and I looked down at a gray man.

Folds of gray flesh hung from his face and neck like ornaments. Gray eyes gleaming like polished metal balls bulged behind thick glasses. His gray hair was cut in a classic flattop. He slumped in an electric wheelchair, his right hand loosely gripping a tiny joystick set in a blue box in the end of the right arm of the chair.

His right foot was gone, and his left foot, stuffed in a new white sock, was obviously missing several toes. He wore shiny

tan pants, and a bright red shirt was draped over his lumpy torso.

He looked up at me and grunted. I gave him my smile, thrust out my hand, and said, "Mr. Dauer? My name is Harry Neal. I wonder if I may talk with you a moment?"

"What about? If you're selling something, you got the wrong man. I only deal with our fine local merchants, not some door-to-door riffraff that preys on decent folks."

"I'm not a salesman, Mr. Dauer, I'm local. I used to teach at the college." I hesitated, focused on his eyes, and said, "I'd like to talk to you about an old friend of yours, Emma Pearson."

His eyes stayed cold and vacant, not a flicker at hearing Emma's name. He fiddled with the joystick, and the wheelchair moved back a foot. We stared at each other. I was conscious of the wind pushing through the trees and the scolding birds.

Finally he said, "Well, why didn't you say so, come in, come in," and he backed into the house.

I followed him into a small square room. Except for a huge black television sitting on the floor in the corner and several large and small pictures in black frames scattered around the floor by the television, the room was empty. The dark paneled walls were speckled with lighter squares and rectangles where the pictures had hung. I stood by the door and looked down at Dauer. "Living the simple life?"

He smiled, politely, mechani-

cally, and pointed at a hallway. "I'm leaving. Everything's packed up and ready to go. The day after tomorrow I'm on my way."

I crossed the room and looked. At the end of a narrow hall that ran the length of the house was a wall of boxes stacked four high. Each one was neatly labeled in bold black letters. I read: WINTER CLOTHES, SUMMER CLOTHES, LIFE MAGAZINE JAN-DEC, 64. I stood there, hands in my pockets, and stared at the boxes. Finally I cleared my throat and said, "You collect *Life* magazines."

Dauer grunted. "You can bet on that. I have every issue, every issue. Best reading in the world. A person can get a damn good education just by reading *Life*." He fluttered an arm at me. "Go on, look in that last room down there. Go! Look."

I walked down the hall, stood in the last doorway, and looked into a small room. Through the window of the back door I saw the squirrel jump from the bird-feeder into a small budding oak.

The room was full of boxes, and if the labels were to be believed, most of the boxes were crammed with issues of *Life*. Two of the other boxes were labeled CLEANING KITS and SPARE BARRELS. Two long wood cases were unlabeled. Three glass-fronted cases were stacked near the door. The top case displayed four handguns. I looked at Dauer, nodded and smiled, and walked back toward him.

I glanced in a doorway and stopped. It was a small room and

contained a blue canvas cot, a tiny refrigerator, a two foot stack of *Life* magazines and, leaning against the wall, at least a dozen rifles. From the looks of them, the rifles were old, World War I maybe. Two of them had bayonets fixed to their barrels. "Collected guns all my life," Dauer said. "Got them sold now, man's coming to pick them up tomorrow afternoon, both rooms. They won't let me have any guns where I'm going, but for awhile I had one of the best collections around. Lots of folks would come see it."

I leaned against the door jamb. Dauer blocked the end of the hall like a cork in a bottle and looked directly in my eyes. For a moment the silence was thick and clumsy as we stared at each other. Finally I said, "You collect guns and *Life* magazines. My thing is reading old newspapers at the library. A few days ago I was reading an issue of the *Gazette* and came across the story of Emma Pearson's disappearance. I got curious and tried to find out more. I've been asking around, and someone thought you might have known her."

He looked out a small, sparkling clean window and pulled on the flesh hanging from his jaw. "I'm not saying I never knew her. I think there was maybe an Emma in my class, but I'll be damned if I remember her."

I raised my eyebrows, went hmm, and said, "Nothing you remember, nothing at all?"

He stared at his right hand and watched his stubby, wrinkled

fingers gently tap against the joystick. He shook his head.

"Nope. Can't help you, Harry. Wish I could, but listen, we're talking a long ways back. Hell, I can't remember what Sally, my wife, looked like, and she's only been buried nine years."

I stuck a rueful look on my face, ran a hand over my hair, and said, "Well, it was worth a try. Where are you going that they won't let you have guns?"

Warmth flowed into his eyes, and he smiled like a shy boy given candy by a distant aunt. "A retirement community. Right on the coast. I've sold everything I own here, house, guns, the magazines, the lot. People are coming with money tomorrow afternoon. Cash money. The next day I head for Portsmouth."

"You're a lucky man," I said. "It's lovely. Winters are milder on the coast. But it's expensive."

"It is, it is, but it's going to be worth it. Everyone I know from here is dead or moved away. It's been lonely the past three or four years, I can tell you. My daughter and granddaughter live in Durham, and I'll be able to see a lot of them. Here, if it weren't for satellite TV, I believe I would have gone around the bend."

He smiled, awkwardly bent forward and to the side, and picked up a picture from the floor. Gripping the frame in both hands he held it up to his face. The warmth in his eyes was tangible, and his smile lit his gray face with a faint pink glow. "My daughter and granddaughter, the finest two

people on this earth. I married late, wanted to be sure I had the right woman, didn't want some flighty piece of work who wouldn't go the long run. Molly was wonderful . . . wonderful." He shook his head. "Then the cancer." Dauer was silent a moment; then he smiled and said, "Yes, Mr. Neal, it's going to be different. I'll be close to Sandra and Mary, the two finest people on this earth, I'll have friends again, and I won't be marking the time by my insulin shots. Yessir, life is going to be good again."

I thought about stopping at Gretchen's for an early supper but decided against it and headed home.

Spring's edge had been blunted by plummeting temperatures and a tough, chill wind that badgered me without letup. Head down, legs pumping, I pedaled on, my irritation tempered by the vision of a warm fire and a full mug of wine.

As I struggled up the last hill before reaching the farm, I heard a plaintive, high-pitched meowing. I turned and in the ditch that ran beside the road glimpsed a small bloody head. It yowled again as I pedaled past. I gritted my teeth and kept pedaling and started humming to block out its cries.

No.

I turned around and coasted down the hill to the injured critter, slowly got off my bike, and slid into the muddy ditch.

It was a cat. A female. Her

tawny fur was wet and matted with blood, and she held her blood-soaked left front paw off the ground. Her face was bloody, and her left hip was slashed, exposing muscle and tendons and a pulsing artery. She looked at me, held up the injured paw, meowed, and slowly laid her head in the mud.

I closed my eyes, took two deep breaths, and opened them again. She lay in the mud, watching me, waiting for whatever was coming. I cleared my throat, wiped tears from my eyes, and gently stroked the top of her head.

Then I took off my sweatjacket and laid it on a patch of new grass. I know that when dealing with an injured cat you're supposed to put a jacket or blanket over it to prevent getting bitten and scratched, but the look in her eyes prevented that.

I slid my hands under the cat's body, lifted, and with extreme care laid her on the jacket. Wrapping the jacket around her body as gently as I knew how, I carried her to the bike and laid her in the trailer. I stroked her head a few times and whispered, "Hang in there, girl, just hang on for a bit, okay?"

Slowly, very slowly, she lifted her head a little and licked my hand.

Annie opened the door, gave my bundle and me a look, shook her head, and stepped aside. I walked through her kitchen, a multicolored monument to gadgets and neglect, and into the

clinic she maintains for the residents' pets and the farm animals.

I laid the cat on a long stainless table and stepped back. Annie opened the jacket and gently cupped the cat's head in her palm. She looked at it a moment and said, "Okay. A severe laceration, left paw; broken teeth; severe laceration, and possible hip fracture; possible internal injuries; blood loss."

She shook her head. "I don't know, Harry. Why don't you go about your business and stop by tomorrow. You can either bury her or pay for a few days' room and board."

I touched the cat's head. Once again she licked my finger and stared up at me. I cleared my throat and murmured, "Give it your best, please," and stumbled out.

I stood outside Annie's house and breathed the cool evening air. I wanted to go home. Go to the grove and my boat, fill a mug and sit and think about anything except young dead girls or mortally injured animals. Instead I trudged to the other end of the barn and walked up the rough pine steps and into the lounge.

The room vibrated with the hum of chatter and smelled richly of overcooked beef. I grabbed a plate, a beautiful thing etched in red, and shuffled along the line. A spoonful of peas, a forkful of pasta, a baked potato, and coffee. I passed on the thick-sliced, overdone beef.

The woman just ahead of me, a tiny creature with pure silver

hair and a face like a horse looked up at me and said, "Why, Harry Neal, eating with us twice in one week. Goodness, goodness, goodness. Have you decided to join humanity again, or did your craft finally sink into the ground?"

I dipped into my pocket, showed her the jeweled clip, and said, "Have you ever seen this, Mrs. Duncan?"

She stared at it. "No, but whoever owned it knew beauty."

"I think one Emma Pearson. Ever hear of her?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't believe I've ever heard the name. Is she still alive?"

"No," I said, "She died some time ago."

"They'll say that about me before long. 'Barbra Duncan still around?' people will ask, and the answer will be, nope, that one's dead as Hogan's goat and smells just as bad."

Before settling at a table I approached three more residents. They stared, fondled, and shook their heads. Forty years is a long time.

Holding my red plate, I looked around, found who I wanted, and sat down at a lopsided card table with two old men dressed in faded, stained khaki digging away at short stacks of that old, thick beef. Bert, a pale, stout gentleman with perhaps twenty very long, very white hairs growing out of the top of his pink scalp, said, "Harry, what brings you to this little 'feast of the ancients'? Certainly something mercenary."

I plopped the jeweled clip in

the puddle of gravy on top of his sliced beef and said, "Bert, you've been around here since the Boer War. Ever seen that adorning the hair of some fair damsel?"

Bert gave me a look, wiped the clip off with a black napkin, and tossed it back to me. "Nope. That thing adorned damsels I could never afford, the kind one stares at from across the street or across the room but never dares to approach because one would get a frosty smile and a rejection that would reel one's balls right into one's gut."

Amos, shy, emaciated Amos. Haunted by forty years of depression and migraines. He slowly picked up the jeweled clip, lifted it to his face, kissed it, and gently set it back down in front of me. He smiled a sad, gentle smile and whispered . . . "Emma."

Bert shook his head. "Don't get excited, Harry. I think Emma is his idealized dream. A figment, a ghost that swims around in that mess between his ears."

Smiling that sad, gentle smile, Amos Brown gazed at me with bright manic eyes and nodded.

After supper, toting a glass of Mogen David's best, I mingled. Glass in hand, smile in place, I slid into small groups and showed the clip, mentioned Emma's name, and awaited comment.

Oohs and ahhs over its beauty, offers to buy, and frequent snide comments about my motives, but no memories of a poetic young woman. I thought of again approaching Amos but didn't. Regardless of any connection

I didn't want to stir that mess between his ears. Finally I walked down the rough pine steps and headed for the grove. I was half-way across the pasture when something came out of the night and touched my shoulder.

I yelped and jumped straight up. A man, little more than shadow, stood beside me. I sucked in air, blew it out, and said, "Jesus Christ, Amos, you damn near gave me a heart attack."

He stepped closer. His soft, gentle whisper floated on the night air like a raven's feather. "Emma. The clip was Emma's."

"Yes, I know."

"It was I who gave her the gold for her hair. I loved to see it resting in the black black black of her hair, glowing like a living thing. It belonged to my mommy. Mommy the witch, Mommy the bitch, Mommy with the switch."

We stood in the night, facing each other. I could feel his eyes on me. My right hand was in my pocket, clamped around the clip. I took a deep breath and said, "Amos, I . . ."

He reached out, touched me on the shoulder, and said, "We were happy. We would read poetry to each other. Then I left, the army wanted me. I wore green uniforms and heavy boots for twenty weeks, and then a man with gold braid on his hat told me I wasn't wanted in the military. When I was home again, Emma knew another man. I talked to her. She was in pain. She was pregnant, and the man hated her for it. Then she was gone."

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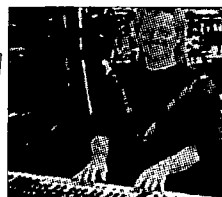
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Again Amos reached out and touched my shoulder. "Emma, my Emma. She's dead?"

I nodded.

"Yes, Amos. She's dead. Amos, who was the man? Who was the other man she knew?"

"Are you doing something? About Emma? Emma with the black black hair. Emma with the child?"

"Yes," I stammered. "I am."

And Amos Brown whispered, "Samuel Dauer," and was gone.

I stood in the pasture, head bowed, eyes closed, and concentrated on the feel of the cool breeze drifting across my face. Then I walked back to the barn, retrieved my bicycle, and pedaled to town.

I put the bike in the trees behind Dauer's mobile home, on hands and knees threaded my way between clumps of brush to the house, and stood up. I crept to the back living room window and slowly, ever so slowly, moved my face along the window until I could peer inside.

Dauer was in the middle of the room slumped in the wheelchair. His head, flickering with images from the huge television, was on his chest. His heavy arms hung over the wheelchair. Beside the chair were two empty bottles of Coor's Light, a small stack of *Life* magazines, and what appeared to be an insulin kit.

With my fingers skimming the tin siding I made my way along the back of the house to the front corner. Like an anxious mouse I

tested the air, trying to sense any danger. I cocked my head and strained to hear any human presence, but all I heard was my rasping breath and the drumming in my chest.

I eased around the corner and scurried to Dauer's back door. Holding my breath, I wrapped my fingers around the knob, hesitated, then twisted.

The door was locked.

I crept along the house, slid through the deck rails, and stood in the shadow by the front door. I put my hand on the knob and turned.

I turned the knob and with infinite care eased the door open enough to slip into the house. I closed the door and stood in the room, trembling, sweating. And Gretchen's dry voice skimmed through my mind: "Harry, you're always sweating."

The room flickered like a candle in the wind from the light of the television, and canned laughter bounced through the house. Dauer, his head on his chest, snored quietly. On tiptoe I crossed the room and stepped into the hall, took quick giant steps, and entered the back room.

I knelt beside the stack of gun cases, took the top one, and held it near the door. They were all revolvers, large caliber revolvers. I put the case down, grabbed the second one, and took it to the door.

Pistols. Big ones. Army .45's, I thought. I lifted the last case and peered at it. Two pistols, two revolvers. The gun in the lower left

corner was a Colt pistol with wood grips. The bluing was worn, the grips dried out and cracked.

It was a .22.

I put the case on the floor, fumbled around the sides until I found the catch, and opened it. The Colt was held in place by small leather straps. I tugged and yanked and finally pulled the goddamned gun free. I stuck it in my pants, re-stacked the cases, walked down the hall to the living room, marched past Dauer snoring in his wheelchair, opened the front door, and left.

At eleven the next morning as I pedaled up the drive I heard Annie yell for me. It was another classic spring morning: blue sky, a pleasant breeze, and birds streaking every which way, preparing for another frantic summer of nesting. It was certainly not a morning to bury a fallen animal. I kept pedaling.

By noon I was stationed in the trees by the side of Dauer's house. I sat against an old dying birch and sipped coffee, swatted black flies and watched the house.

At one thirty, two middle-aged men with greasy looking beards, wearing baseball caps and overalls, parked their pickup on the grass by the ramp and went into the house. Minutes later they began loading boxes into the bed of the pickup. They loaded the gun cases, the old rifles, and Dauer's collection of *Life* magazines. The last things they loaded were the huge black television and the satellite dish.

Sitting up straight in his wheelchair and watching every move from a corner of the deck, Dauer waved his hands, chatted, and laughed a lot. When they finished, one of the men gave Dauer a white envelope. Everyone shook hands, and the men drove off. Dauer watched the pickup drive away, then wheeled himself back in the house.

Forty minutes later a new-looking white Dodge Caravan pulled into the yard. Painted on the door of the van was NOZICK REALTY. A pudgy, middle-aged woman with long blonde hair climbed out of the van. She wore a tight white dress cinched with a wide black belt and carried a black leather briefcase. She strutted up the ramp, knocked twice on the door, and entered.

Fifteen minutes later the woman came out of the house, strutted down the ramp, climbed into the Caravan, and drove off. She wasn't carrying the black leather briefcase.

I waited ten minutes, then walked out of the trees and up the ramp and quietly opened the door. Dauer was sitting in the exact middle of the empty room surrounded by the pictures of his daughter and granddaughter. The briefcase was in his lap. His lips moved as he fingered the thick bundles of money.

"So first thing tomorrow you'll be gone."

At the sound of my voice Dauer jerked his head around.

"Wha . . . what are you doing here?"

I leaned against the wall, folded my arms, and said, "I came to wish you bon voyage, Samuel. I came to wish you a pleasant journey . . . I came to wish you well."

His gray mouth sagged in a lopsided frown, his bulging gray eyes dilated with fear, and he looked up at me and instinctively laid both arms over the open briefcase. "I—I want you to leave. Now. Go. Get out of here."

I was trembling slightly. Not much, perhaps like an individual in the first stages of Parkinson's, and I was aware of a weakening in my knees. But I braced, inhaled deeply, pointed at his face, and said in a hissing stagewhisper, "I know you killed Emma Pearson and her unborn child."

His mouth dropped open, and he gawked at me. Then he shook his head. "No, no. No way. You are surely nuts. No, no way, not now. Not now."

"You took her down the river, shot her, dragged her body into the woods, and buried her."

Dauer pointed at the door. "Get out. Now, right now. Get out or I'll . . ."

"Call the police? Go ahead, Dauer. If you want, I'll go to the nearest phone and call them for you. What would you like me to say?"

Like an old dog with an earache he shook his head. "How, how could you ever think such a thing? I'm an honest, upstanding citizen of this town. Have been for over sixty years. . . . Sixty years. I have a lovely daughter and granddaughter."

I lifted my sweatjacket, pulled the Colt out of my waistband, and carefully laid it on the floor between us. Dauer leaned over and stared at it. I squatted.

"That is the pistol you used to kill Emma and her child. And," I opened my fist and let him see the tiny piece of lead, "this is the bullet you shot into her brain. Into the left side of her head, just above her ear." I took the jeweled clip out of my pocket and held it in front of his face. He clamped his eyes shut and moaned like a bitter night wind.

"Ballistics. I don't think the police will have any trouble because you never fired the pistol again, did you? Does your daughter or your granddaughter know you're a double murderer? Would they like to know, Dauer?"

Slowly he shook his large gray head. He looked like a sad-faced clown whose act had gone sour. "She was pregnant. I told her to get an abortion. She wanted to have the child. A freedom child, she called it. She wrote goddamn poems about it. Jesus . . . freedom child."

"So you took her into the woods and shot her."

"Canoeing. She loved to float down the river in my canoe. I told her I'd help her with the kid. We sometimes would take the canoe and drink some wine and make love on the riverbank. That time . . . that time." He took a deep breath, held it, then blew it out and coughed. "That time she was sitting on the beach making pictures in the sand with her finger,

and I came up behind her and shot her and she fell forward and flopped around for a while and died. I dragged her into the woods, to a clearing, and buried her. Forty years, it's been forty years."

"Think of the trial, Dauer. You'll be famous. The press will be in a frenzy. Your daughter and granddaughter, well, I guess they'll be a bit disappointed in you, won't they?"

With a massive effort he lifted his head and looked at me. In a child's mournful whisper he said, "You want my money, don't you?"

I stared down at him for a long time. Finally I said, "To the last penny in your pocket."

I got the goddamn gate open, pushed the bike through, and had started the task of getting the thing closed when I heard Annie yell, "Come and face it, Harry." So I leaned the bike against the fence, took off my sweatjacket and threw it over the briefcase lying in the little trailer, and walked the length of the barn.

Annie was sitting at her kitchen table, which was cluttered with coffeepots, a dirty electric skillet, two dirty blenders, and one pathetic cat. I walked to the table and stroked its head with a finger. She meowed, licked my finger, and started purring. "I must be getting old," Annie said. "A fifteen-suture lacerated paw, two broken, now missing, teeth, and a twenty-suture laceration along the left hip. But no internal injuries."

The cat's left front leg was encased in a white bandage. Ugly, crusted sutures traced a jagged line across her shaved hip, and most of her facial fur had been shaved. She struggled to her feet and performed a lopsided, staggering, sideways walk to the edge of the table. She looked up at me, lifted her good paw, and meowed.

Annie sighed, stood up, and held out a large lumpy cloth bag.

"Soft catfood, don't feed her anything else. And several kinds of medicine. Directions are inside. She takes it like a trouper. Payment would be appreciated ASAP."

I gently lifted the cat and snugged her into my arm, grabbed the bag, and said, "I'll pay you in a few days."

Annie nodded. "Very well. Perhaps you could start on the wood."

It took a while but we finally made it to the boat, and I scurried around fixing up a litterbox, putting some old blankets and sweatclothes in the tiny cabin under the cockpit, and laying out food and water. She watched all this from under the settee, then staggered around getting the feel of things. We fought through medicine time, she took a few sips of water, made an obviously painful trip to the litterbox, and crawled into her cabin. When I peeked in ten minutes later, she was stretched out on my old patch quilt asleep.

Feline chores done, I sat at the settee drinking my supper and counting money.

Forty-one thousand three hun-

dred and twenty-two dollars and sixty-eight cents. Every single penny that Samuel Dauer had possessed. I opened another bottle of supper, drank for a while, and shuffled off to bed.

Two days later with Cat in the trailer snuggled in a mass of blankets, I pedaled to town. Cat insisted on coming along, and I figured the spring sun would do her a world of good.

I made a few circuits around downtown, then settled in the park. I sat against an ancient maple sipping lime-flavored seltzer and protecting Cat from an inquisitive dachshund and its three hundred pound owner. Betty Worthen walked through and returned my wave with a smile and a wave of her own. A local, and later a state, police car circled the common and ignored me. One of the county prosecutors strolled through the park munching a sandwich. When I waved, she smiled and said, "Afternoon, Harry."

Satisfied, I pushed the bike out of the park and down the alley to Gretchen's. I leaned the bike against the back wall, snugged Cat into the crook of my arm, and sat down in the last booth.

A few minutes later Gretchen put a large glass of wine in front of me and slid into the opposite seat. She looked at me, looked at Cat, and smiled. "Jesus, Harry, that's the sorriest cat I've ever seen. What happened to it?"

"I found it alongside the road; a car probably got it. Annie saved it."

She shook her head, still smiling.

"You know, you two are kind of suited for each other. Two beat-up loners strolling along on the other side of life." She took my glass and gulped down maybe a third of my wine. "You hear about Dauer?"

"Dauer?"

She gave me a look.

"Yeah, Dauer, one of the people on that list you showed me. Samuel Dauer."

"What about him?"

"A couple of days ago Tommy Briggs, that new patrolman, found him in the park sitting in his wheelchair crying like a whipped puppy."

"Really?" I said. "What was the problem?"

"Nobody seems to know. Sold his house and everything in it, but don't seem to have any money. Tommy says he might have given it to his daughter, but she claims she hasn't seen a cent." Gretchen smiled a grim little smile. "According to Tommy, she's been yelling at Chief Morin for two days now, but Morin's looked backwards and forwards into the thing. Problem is Dauer won't say boo to anybody, just sits in his chair and mutters. Takes food and drink, but that's about it. Tommy says he's one unhappy camper."

She sipped more of my wine, looked at me over the rim of her glass, smiled her little smile, and said, "They took Dauer over to the county home this morning. Tommy says it's a pretty good bet

that that's where he'll stay until he dies."

"Too bad," I said. "But at least he's alive. At least he can wheel himself to a window and watch sunsets or see wildflowers in the wind. He can laugh along with his television or take a drink of wine. He's alive. The question is, does he deserve to be alive?"

Gretchen stared at me for an uncomfortable length of time. Then she pushed up from the booth, touched Cat's nose with a finger, and patted me on the shoulder. "I'll have Lisa bring you more wine. You take care of yourself, Harry, that cat needs you."

Four days later, with Cat in tow, I pedaled into town and spent a few hours making myself conspicuous. I saw Betty Worthen twice, and she saw me. I waved at two local cruisers, and the blue-hatted young men driving them smiled at me and waved back. I had a ritual glass of wine at Gretchen's and watched Gretchen feed Cat a couple of ounces of tuna and laugh as Cat staggered around the table, swinging her stiff, injured legs with aplomb.

I pedaled back to the boat. After supper, with Cat in my arms, I walked through a cool rain to Annie's. She opened her door dressed in a faded red terrycloth robe at least five sizes too large. Her gray-white hair looked like a grenade had gone off in it. Once seated at the table I pushed blenders, toasters, and a cast-iron skillet full of peanuts out of the way,

set Cat and Annie's cloth bag on the cleared space, and said, "Thought I'd pay you for Cat."

Annie took a sip of her laced coffee. "Anything you could spare would be appreciated, Harry. God knows we need it."

Trying to refrain from any dramatics, I pushed her cloth bag across the table. Annie looked at me, raised one eyebrow, and turned the bag upside down. The packs of bills tumbled out, forming a small ragged pile by her blenders. Cat clumped across the table, batted at one with her good paw, and succeeded in knocking it the floor.

Annie picked it up and tossed it back on the stack. She lit a cigarette, coughed twice, and blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. "How much?" she whispered.

"Thirty-six thousand," I said.

She nodded to herself while staring thoughtfully at the money, then picked up a bundle and fanned the bills. "I assume I shall have to be discreet."

"I would appreciate it. And I don't think I want to cut wood this summer."

Annie laughed.

"The complaints and blisters will be fierce," she said, "but we'll persevere."

I gently pulled Cat away from the money and snugged her into my arm. "I have to run. I'm going to hunt up Amos Brown. It occurred to me that Cat would make a good companion for him. Perhaps ease his depression a bit."

Annie's face went slack.

She snubbed out her cigarette against the side of the table and said softly, "You haven't heard, have you? Amos died in his sleep last night. The doctor will say congestive heart failure, but I submit that he died of anguish. I'm sorry, Harry. Cat would have made a good companion for our tortured friend, but it's simply too late. Amos is gone."

I lit several candles, got a fire going in the stove, then sat, mug in hand, watching shadows cavort around the cabin. Cat tottered to the open stove, flopped down, and gazed into the flames.

When the bottle was empty, I got up, put more wood on the fire, and closed the door. I took Emma's clip out of my pocket and placed it in a small leather-clad box on top of my dresser. I looked at it for a moment, then closed the lid.

Tomorrow I would go to the clearing and bury Dauer's pistol in the grave. I would bury it deeper than he buried Emma.

Tomorrow I would bury Emma

here in the grove, at the edge of the treeline near a patch of wildflowers. Mildred and Helen would be with me, undoubtedly praying and satisfied that "that poor dear soul" is at rest in a proper grave and that things have been set right.

I staggered to bed and sank into a fitful sleep.

Deep in the night I was awakened by soft cries and turned on the light. Cat was on the floor by my bed, the claws of her good paw stuck in my blanket. I reached down with both hands, lifted her and placed her at the foot of the bed, turned off the light, and settled back. She immediately struggled to her feet, made the journey forward, and spent a considerable amount of time fussing around my head and getting settled by my pillow.

She noisily cleaned herself, mewling softly whenever the pain told her she'd moved wrong, and purred loudly for several minutes when she was done.

Then I felt the soft weight of her head on the pillow.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the December issue.

Joe Navarro would much rather be at home with his wife Lolita. But, he sighed, a homicide detective can't choose his hours. Ahead he could see the condos from which Patrolman Paul Price had phoned to confirm a murder, just two squarish structures outlined against the sunset. Joe wondered why they had been named Twin Towers, for each was only four stories high. A flower garden, swimming pool, and tennis court separated the two stark buildings.

Navarro parked in the circular driveway. Price came forward to meet him.

"What have we got, Paul?" asked the detective.

"Woman, fairly young, killed by a .22 bullet right through her heart. She's the wife of a local high school teacher."

"Domestic violence?" Navarro hoped to wrap up this case quickly.

"Evidently not, sir. Other residents in her building say the shot came from the opposite tower. I'd guess the bullet came through an open window facing that direction."

"How many people live here?"

"Eight couples in all—four in the North Tower and four in the South Tower. You see, there's only one two-bedroom condo on each floor of the two buildings. Each husband follows a different profession. I don't know how well the couples know one another."

"Who found the body?"

"Her husband. He claims he came home late after grading papers at the school. She was lying on the floor. He admits turning the body over to try to revive her. Then, realizing she was dead, he screamed. Neighbors heard him and hurried to his condo. This was, they estimate, a half hour after they heard the shot, which they had dismissed as an auto backfire."

"I see. Any sign of a weapon?" asked Navarro.

"Yeah. Four of 'em."

"Four?"

"That's right. I searched both towers while waiting for you. I found identical, expensive .22 rifles in the condos of the auto salesman, the banker, the contractor, and the engineer. All admit ownership."

"Any of them been fired recently?"

"Yes, all of them, sir."

"What? Four rifles, all the same make, and all fired recently? How do they explain that?"

"The men say they belong to a rifle club. They had a shooting contest this afternoon."

Joe Navarro whistled softly. "This isn't going to be an easy one. Let's have a look at the body."

Patrolman Price led the way. The victim's husband met them at the door, evidently in a state of shock. His eyes were red and unfocused. He simply pointed toward one of the bedrooms.

The woman was blonde and was evidently in her late twenties. Her tennis outfit was stained with blood.

Joe Navarro stood over the body and sighted toward the open window on the other side of the bedroom. "Paul," he declared, "I agree that the shot came from that direction. It could only have come from the condo in the opposite tower on this same level. That should simplify matters. Let's question all the residents and find out who lives where."

At the end of an hour the two officers met again and compared notes on what they had learned:

(1) One of the husbands is named Bert, and one of the wives is named Helga. Adam (who is not the store manager) is in a different tower from Alice. One man is an automobile salesman.

(2) In one tower Alice has the condo just below Mrs. Norman and just above Frank's wife; they are married to the banker, the contractor, and the doctor. In the opposite tower Mrs. Ord is just below Betty and just above George's wife; they are married to the artist, the store manager, and the bereaved teacher.

(3) Edgar is on the same level as Ellen but in the other tower. He is not the engineer, and she isn't married to the contractor.

(4) Mr. and Mrs. Parks live in the South Tower.

(5) Mr. Queen (who isn't the artist) isn't married to Gina or Ellen.

(6) In one tower Dora has the condo just below Carl (who isn't the store manager) and just above Mrs. Manus. Henry (who isn't the doctor) is on a different floor in the opposite tower.

(7) Mr. and Mrs. Katz live above the second floor in their tower.

(8) Gina (who is not the wife of the contractor) is just below Mrs.

Jules and just above Dan. Ellen lives on a different floor in the same tower.

(9) Flora's condominium is just above that of Mrs. Queen. On different levels from either Flora or Mrs. Queen and in the opposite tower, Clara has the condo just below Mrs. Lewis.

"Paul," said Joe Navarro, "we know the name of the victim and the only place from which the fatal shot could have come. It's time we had a serious talk with _____ in the _____ Tower."

Who was killed? Whom do Navarro and Price suspect? Where were the slayer and the victim at the time of the murder?

See page 142 for the solution to the October puzzle.

.....
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FICTION

HOARE AND THE PASSED MASTER

Wilder
Perkins

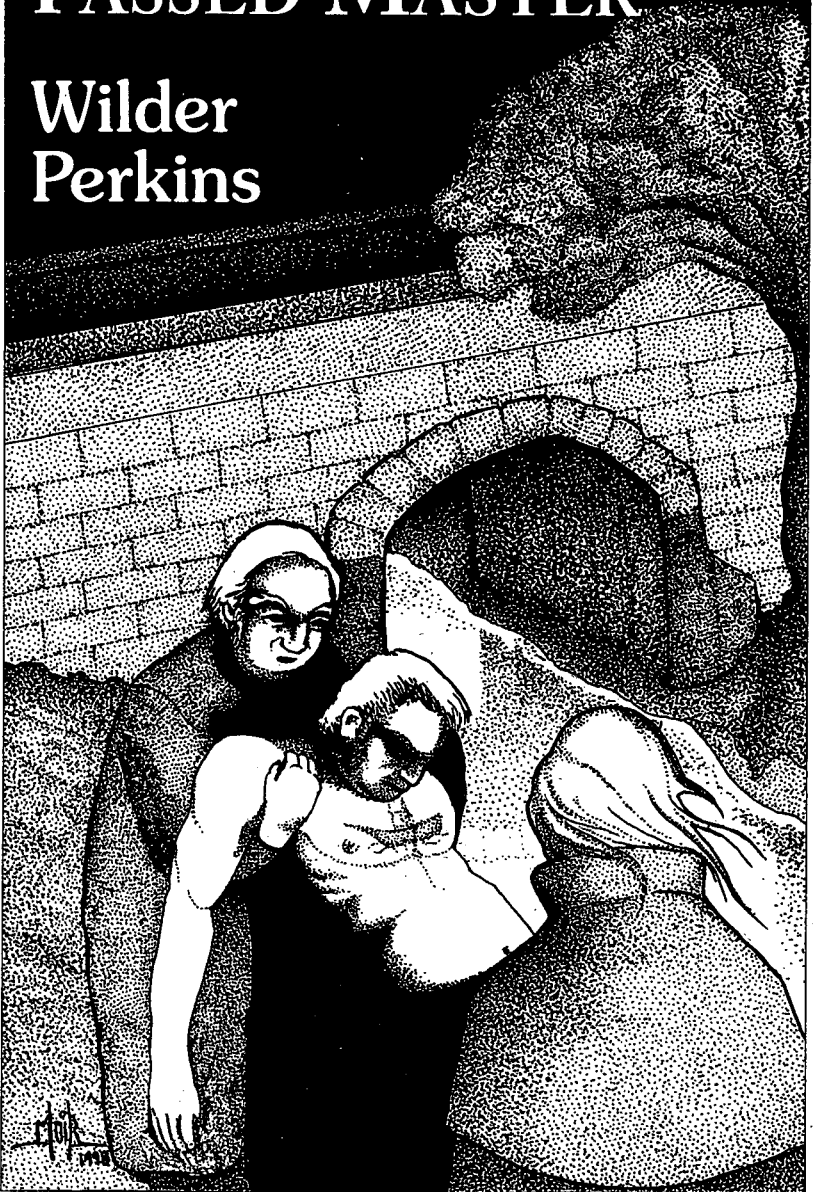


Illustration by James Moir

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 11/98

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“Halloooo!”

The call did not come from the cart halted on the moonlit bridge just ahead of Bartholomew Hoare, but from beneath the bridge. There was a swinging golden light down there, a swinging golden light as if from a lantern. Hoare drew rein to listen. The call came again.

Hoare had been looking forward to his own bed in his quarters at the Swallowed Anchor in Portsmouth, but a consuming curiosity had always been his bane.

Below, a bulky figure held a lantern in one hand while holding up a naked body with the other by a sling passed below its armpits. The body's gray-white head hung at an unnatural angle, the huge wound in its throat grinning like an extra mouth.

“Who is he?” Hoare whispered. He had lost the use of his vocal cords ten years ago and had whispered ever since.

“Haven't the remotest idea, my good man.” The fat man lugged the corpse up the slope below. “What difference does it make?”

“Well, where are you taking him?”

“Up to my cart, you ninny. You needn't whisper; he can't hear you. He's dead, you know. The bugger's heavy. Come along now; take his feet.”

Hoare obeyed orders, dismounted, and hitched his horse to the cart's starboard quarter. Clambering carefully down the bank, he picked up the corpse by its bare feet, holding them to either side of him like the handles of a wheelbarrow. At the handling, the body expelled a vile reek of corruption.

“Mind his head, idiot! Can't you see it's as good as dropping off already without your tossing him about like that? I'm damned if I'll lose a perfectly good head just because you're not up to your job. No help, no pay.”

Light dawned—inside Hoare's own head at least.

“You mistake my identity, sir,” he whispered. “I am no resurrection man; I am a lieutenant in the Royal Navy as you could tell if you were to let your light shine upon me.”

The fat man did so. “Oh Lord,” he said.

“And I presume that you, sir,” Hoare went on, “are a surgeon who has just acquired a body to anatomize.”

The fat man shrugged resignedly. “You have me out, sir. But while you decide how to dispose of me, would you mind . . .” He gestured with his lantern.

By its fitful light Hoare inspected the body he was helping to carry.

The victim had been middle-aged or even elderly. The body was stout and soft—the figure of a powerful man gone to seed. A tattoo across the chest, blurred with time, showed a man-o'-war under full sail and the motto “'Tis to glory we steer.”

This put another complexion on the affair. To connive in supplying a medico with a strange body to anatomize was one thing, but when the body was that of a fellow naval man, it was another.

Hoare dropped the corpse's feet.

"I cannot overlook this, sir. This is a British sailor."

"Oh Lord," the fat man said again. "What shall I do, then?"

"Carry on up the hill to begin with," Hoare said as he picked up the legs again. "Then we shall discuss the situation. Meanwhile, whom have I the honor of assisting?"

"Dunworthy, sir," said the fat man. "Dr. Samuel Dunworthy, of Durley Street. By Bishops Waltham, you know."

Bishops Waltham meant no more to Hoare than Durley Street did.

"Physician and surgeon, sir," Dunworthy went on. As Hoare knew, physicians held themselves as gentry, fit to dine above the salt unlike mere surgeons, who were addressed as mister instead of doctor and fed in the servants' hall, if at all. As the nearly mute Hoare knew all too well, naval surgeons generally deserved no better.

"Hoare," he whispered in reply.

"There is no need to be insulting, sir," said Dr. Dunworthy over his shoulder. "I am as much a gentleman as you."

"I referred to my name, sir, not your profession," Hoare said.

"I do beg your pardon, sir," the doctor said. "Now, if you'll just give our friend here a heave . . . a one—a two—and a *three!* There we are."

"Now, sir," Hoare said, "perhaps you will explain yourself." He backed off into the darkness and—just in case—groped his larboard horse pistol from its holster on the hack's saddle.

Dr. Dunworthy sighed.

"To start *in medias res*, sir, I found my cadaver under the bridge, just where the message told me it would be."

"Do you still have the message?"

Dr. Dunworthy handed Hoare a piece of crumpled paper. "I am engaged, sir, in certain original inquiries relating to the interconnection of various glands: the adrenal, pineal, thyroid, and salivary glands and the testicles, to be precise. I am in hopes of establishing a hitherto undiscovered connection between them, and of presenting my discovery before the Royal Academy. In fact, my preliminary lecture on the subject just the other night, here at Bishops Waltham, was well attended.

"My studies involve anatomization of the human corpus. Mere animal substitutes such as sheep or pigs simply will not do. To this end I have made connection with several—er—suppliers of cadavers. As we both know, of course, this is unlawful. But the interests of science, I am convinced, must take . . ."

"Please come to your point, doctor. It grows late."

"Well then. I found the message under my front door just a few

hours ago. It did not originate with any of my usual sources, for those are barely literate."

"What do you usually do with the remains?"

"Bury them, of course, sir, with a prayer. What else?"

Hoare saw that it would take Dr. Dunworthy a long, long time to spin his yarn to its bitter end. He interrupted again.

"How far are we from Darley Street?"

"Durley Street, sir. By Bishops Waltham. A mere half hour's easy drive. The road forks to the left just ahead. Then we take another left, and our second right, and there we are."

"Excellent." Hoare climbed into the seat beside Dunworthy. "It is too late now for me to make Portsmouth tonight. I shall accompany you there and prevail upon you to provide me with sustenance and a bed." He realized that, as he too often did, he was imitating the speech of his *vis-à-vis* in his own whisper. More than once he had been accused of mockery.

"It will be a pleasure, sir." The doctor's voice was grudging. He slapped the reins on his pony's haunches. The animal woke with a start and began to plod forward. Hoare marked the route as they went; he knew he must return to the scene in daylight.

"Give me the use of your glim," Hoare ordered, and the doctor complied. By its light he examined the message. In block letters, written on rather fine paper, the message was brief enough:

"ive a corpus for you," it read, "if you come to the plaice marked on the map. Bring the usual."

Hoare agreed with Dr. Dunworthy's observation; the brisk, clear hand was that of a literate person.

"What's the usual?" he asked.

"Five pounds, sir," the doctor replied in a whisper. "That's the going rate for a cadaver hereabouts. I heard the other night that it's half that in London—the law of supply and demand, I suppose."

Dunworthy must have realized he had been copying Hoare's whisper. In a normal voice he went on: "I still have the sum by me, for there was no one to whom I might hand it. So I am ahead, I suppose, by one cadaver." The thought appeared to cheer him up.

"Why do you whisper, sir? There's no need, as I told you."

"An old war wound, if you must know," Hoare said.

At the Glorious First of June '94, where he was first in *Staghound*, 38, a spent musketball had crushed his larynx, leaving him unable to speak above a painful croak. Since any deck officer must be able to hail the main masthead in a full gale, *Staghound's* captain had regretfully put him ashore with a letter of high commendation.

It was only this that had found the beached, despairing Hoare a place on the staff of the Port Admiral at Portsmouth. Since then, now forty-two, he had served as general dogsbody, running errands and

taking on any project that a voiceless officer could reasonably accept. The life kept him out of the countryside where his family remained; he had found the stink of bilges and the scurry of rats preferable to the stink of hog manure and the scurry of chickens.

But he had never before faced the problem of finding out who had killed a nameless sailorman.

By journey's end Hoare had seen enough of Dunworthy despite the dark to realize that his dress was tidier than the average unsupervised male's and had concluded that the doctor employed a wife or other female to keep him in order. So it proved. Bearing a guttering candle which she shielded ineffectually with one hand, Mrs. Dunworthy opened the door for them. She was shaped much like her husband as Hoare could readily observe, since she was clad in an enveloping night-rail.

The yawning wife furnished them an end of ham and a slice of yesterday's bread. After attending to his hack, Hoare took his share of the provisions, with his saddlebags, up to the garret room allotted him. It might have been the room of a Dunworthy son—grown and gone? dead?—for a forlorn cock-horse leaned in one corner and a basket of wooden building blocks rested in another.

The bed was too short for Hoare's lanky frame, but no shorter than many of the hammocks and swinging cots of his nights at sea. Stripping off his outer garments, he wound himself into the musty blankets and lay sleepless.

Question after question paraded through his mind, futilely seeking answers. He felt himself out of his depth. How had the dead man come to be under the willow in the dale, as Dunworthy had described the place? Could he have been killed by a resurrection man, or two of them as in the shocking recent case of Burke and Hare in Scotland?

What had the dead man been? He could not have been a boatswain or a gunner, for the body was that of a man out of condition. A purs-er, then, or a master. And who had he been?

Names, names . . .

Hoare's own, of course, was that of his father, Joel Hoare, an Orkneyman of Viking stock. Bartholomew had defended that good name with fists and feet again and again before he was out of small-clothes. Even before Captain Hoare had wangled his son his warrant as midshipman in the brig *Beetle*, young Bartholomew had run a jeering schoolmate through the thigh with a carving knife. By now it was a foolhardy man who mocked the good name of Bartholomew Hoare; whether with pistol, épée, or saber he placed his blow where he chose, making his choice according to the offense. So far, he had always avoided killing his man.

Hoare had been the sole officer of *Beetle* to survive the great September tempest in the last year of the American war, when a widow-

maker sea had swept the others, to a man, from her quarterdeck. Not only that: as he was working the brig northeast to Halifax under jury rig, he had encountered a small Yankee privateer, taken her by a ruse, and brought her into Halifax in modest triumph. So Hoare had been well on his way to renown until that French bullet had as good as ended his career.

Had Dunworthy done the deed himself? If not, who had? Above all, why had Hoare stopped at the bridge?

At last he drifted into sleep.

"Tell me what you make of what this man was when alive," Hoare whispered the next morning as he and Dunworthy faced each other in the cleanly surgery across the remains.

"From the tattoos, he was surely a man of your calling as you have already concluded." With surprisingly gentle hands Dr. Dunworthy probed the body's soft belly. As if in protest it gave off a burst of foul-smelling gas; decomposition was noticeably under way.

"Swollen liver. He probably drank too much port. A sad failing and one I fear I share." He straightened up with a grunt. "Come, Mr. Hoare. Let us make ourselves comfortable in my parlor while I present my conclusions about the man."

Mrs. Dunworthy was well trained, for coffee, cheese, and biscuits awaited them. The two seated themselves on either side of the empty fireplace.

"Well, sir, here is my opinion. The deceased was a man in his fifties, in reasonably good health but no longer fit. His coarse features suggest that he was of common stock. Would you not agree, Mr. Hoare, that he probably began at the bottom of your ladder and worked his way partway up it? I am not familiar with the gradations of rank in the Royal Navy, but he might have become—not quite a commissioned officer, but . . ."

"A warrant officer," said Hoare. "A senior master's mate, probably, or even a master. When did he die?"

"A little more than twelve hours ago, if that. Had we not moved the body about almost without interruption, we might have found it a less flexible burden."

"Could he have killed himself?" Hoare asked.

"Impossible, sir. *Primo*, why would a man strip himself naked before committing *felo-de-se*? Not in our climate. *Secundo*, I saw no blood under the bridge. He was bled dry; where did the blood go? *Tertio*, a person who turns the knife on himself always makes more than one cut. This cut was an admirably decisive one. No, sir; he did not destroy himself. Dear me, no."

"How was he killed, then?"

Dr. Dunworthy looked at Hoare with raised eyebrows.

"The man was not drowned, he was not poisoned, and he was not bludgeoned. His throat was cut, sir, efficiently cut. Decisively, in both senses of the word. You may accept my opinion as certain."

"Well, sir . . ." Hoare rose to his feet " . . . I must return to the place whence we came and search the area. I gather that you saw no sign of the man's clothing?"

"No," the doctor said. "Nor anything else that might pertain to him. It was dark, you will recall."

"You will hear from me. Meanwhile, you must not begin your dissection."

"Not even the salivary glands, sir?" Dr. Dunworthy's voice was piteous.

"Not even the salivary glands, doctor." Hoare suspected that the salivary glands were to be found in the head, and he might want that head for identification.

"Furthermore, sir, I regret to tell you that you must keep the body intact for another twenty-four hours," he told Dunworthy.

The doctor looked at him in dismay: "In summer, sir? Surely you realize that . . ."

"I understand your concern, doctor. Nevertheless, I insist. Also, if you cut into your cadaver in any way that obscures its identification, I shall not answer for the consequences. Furthermore," Hoare added, "you are not to leave the neighborhood."

"I had no intention of doing so, sir. I seldom travel even as far as Southampton. But why do you put this prohibition upon me? And how am I presently circumstanced with respect to the law?"

"If you refer to your having acquired a human body for the purpose of anatomizing, doctor, it is of no consequence to me. I find the law in this respect ridiculous. How else is your profession to increase its pitiful store of knowledge about its patients? My concern is about an apparent officer of the Royal Navy who must now be marked down as 'discharged, dead.'"

Dr. Dunworthy looked greatly relieved.

"But," Hoare went on, "if you refer to the question of how the man came by his death, you will understand that you are under suspicion. I must remind you, sir, that by your own admission, you bought a body. Moreover, this man was murdered, and you might have murdered him."

"Oh Lord," said the fat man. "Am I under arrest, then?"

"I have no authority to arrest a civilian, sir, but you would be wise to follow my advice."

Hoare turned and left his host hanging—so to speak—on his doorstep. Inside himself he dithered. He knew nothing about how such men as London's Row Street Runners proceeded.

*

Hoare readily found his way back to Bishops Waltham and the bridge over the Hamble stream. Three early-rising urchins squatted on the near bank. One was just fishing out a soggy blue garment, another flourished an unmistakable uniform hat.

Hoare put two fingers to his mouth, emitted an ear-splitting whistle, and put spurs to his hack. The urchins shrieked, dropped their booty, and fled.

Hoare dismounted. As he had hoped, the blue object was a naval uniform coat, heavily stained across its breast. It was much like the one he himself was wearing except for a smaller number of buttons—a distinction that only an accustomed eye would notice. The dead man had indeed been a warrant officer and not a King's commissioned officer like Hoare. There was still a purse in the coat; it was a peculiar, wrinkled, leathery object, and it was empty. Reenter the doctor's resurrection man, Hoare decided.

As the doctor had warned, there was no blood to be seen in the vicinity, even though the man must have drenched his surroundings within seconds. He must have been killed elsewhere, stripped, and brought here; the rest of his garments must have been left behind or floated down the Hamble.

The soil was indented by several sets of human footprints, too confused for Hoare to determine what kind of activity had transpired. One set must be Dunworthy's. Dunworthy might be fat, but he was strong—strong enough to have killed the *corpus* himself, since he had been lugging it up the slope alone. The doctor had to be Hoare's principal suspect—at present, indeed, his only one. Whose, then, were the other footprints?

Or perhaps the doctor was a wily man; perhaps he had paid off his supplier in the usual way and simply pretended to Hoare that he had not. But why, then, would he have called for help in the first place?

And Dunworthy, in Hoare's opinion at least, was not murderously inclined. Medicos might well kill as many of their patients as they saved with their debilitating purges and bleedings, but they did not generally do so on purpose. For the most part they were a humane though cynical tribe.

Then, Hoare said to himself, the killer had been the resurrection man he purported to be. But if so, why had he decamped without collecting his pay? Or—considering the tangle of tracks—were there two of them?

When Hoare had been a pipsqueak mid, literally learning his ropes, one elderly bosun used to rejoice in dumping tangles of marline before him and his mates. The last snotty to unravel his tangle got it across his arse, knots and all. It had seemed to Hoare as though each of his tangles had only one end, so it was always his bottom that got beat. Hoare felt that way again.

He had already collected more evidence than he knew what to do with. He bundled up the soggy coat, remounted, and resumed his interrupted return to Portsmouth.

Hoare proceeded to Admiralty House, where Sir George Hardcastle, Rear-Admiral of the Blue, commanded the naval base and all that lay therein. From the admiral's flag secretary he requested information about any ships' pursers or masters gone adrift.

"*Severn*, 28, just reported her master, Timothy Tregallen, two days overdue from leave. She's under twenty-four hour orders to weigh for Gibraltar. But why should you care? Has he been pilfering ship's stores, or bugging the mids?"

"As to that, I don't know," Hoare whispered. "Probably both, considering his position. But he's changed his ways now, for certain." He stepped to the door of the admiral's sanctum.

Admiral Hardcastle was a busy man, Hoare knew, and a grim, merciless one to boot. He heard Hoare out, reading and signing papers as he listened. Then he said, "Find out who killed him, have him hanged, and tell me when you've done it. Good day, sir; you know your way out."

"Where does *Severn* lie?" Hoare asked the secretary as he closed the admiral's door behind him.

"Just beyond *Vantage*. You know; that new frigate just commissioning."

Taking advantage of his authority to use any of the pulling boats assigned to the port admiral's office, Hoare selected one of the four-oared gigs lying at the Sally Port and told its coxswain to take him out to *Severn*. The breeze was easterly and the course southerly, so he had the cox rig the gig's mast and lugsail and took over the tiller himself. Even after twenty years on the beach, the sea still affected him like some addictive drug.

Hoare swung the gig under *Severn's* lee and swarmed aboard her starboard side briskly, glad of the chance to prove himself still a proper seaman. He doffed his hat to the quarterdeck and asked to be taken to the first lieutenant.

Hoare bitterly envied any seagoing officer. But with his power over all her other people, a ship's first lieutenant (after a post captain, of course) was the luckiest afloat. This one, a Mr. Barnard, was obviously preoccupied with preparing his frigate for sea. He wasted no time in pleasantries.

"What brings you aboard us, sir?" he asked as soon as Hoare had identified himself.

Since Barnard made none of the usual fatuous comments about his name or his whisper, he must already know of Hoare, his odd posi-

tion, and the disabilities of voice and name that had made him notorious about Portsmouth.

"I understand your master has gone adrift," Hoare whispered.

"True enough," Barnard said.

"I'm afraid he's lost the number of his mess."

"What?"

Hoare told his sorry story, leaving out the details. He knew he would have to tell it again and again; his whisper tired easily, and he wanted to save it.

"Captain Drysdale will want to hear this. I'll take you to him. Pray come with me, sir."

Hoare trotted obediently after Barnard down to Captain Drysdale's cabin. Like every active naval captain when in port, Drysdale spent his time anchored behind his desk. "Ah. Admiral Hardcastle's Mr. Hoare, isn't it?" The captain set down his pen. "Welcome aboard, sir."

"Mr. Hoare bears ill tidings, sir," Barnard said. "Tregallen."

"He has been found dead, sir," Hoare whispered.

"Oh my," said Captain Drysdale. "Well, take a pew, gentlemen, and let's hear the story."

Twice Hoare had to interrupt his report to refresh his whisper; twice Captain Drysdale had to interrupt it to demand silence above his quarters so he could hear it. At length Hoare fell silent.

There was a pause.

"Obviously, some body-snatcher did it, or the doctor," said Barnard. "It's none of our affair now."

Barnard rose, stooping instinctively to avoid stunning himself on the low overhead. He glanced at Hoare as if expecting him to follow suit, but Hoare remained seated.

"As Mr. Barnard says, sir, it does appear as though some resurrection man did the deed, or even Dr. Dunworthy," he said. "Nevertheless, it is essential—especially since *Severn* and her people will soon be out of reach—that I take this opportunity to question Mr. Tregallen's shipmates."

Barnard sat down again with a thump and glared at Hoare. "Do you have the gall, sir, to suggest that one of my men killed him?"

"I must make certain that that cannot be the case, Mr. Barnard."

"By whose authority?"

"The authority of Admiral Sir George Hardcastle, whose immediate subordinate I am. Do you question that? If so, pray send a signal of inquiry ashore." Hoare eyed the other officer coldly.

"Make the necessary arrangements for our visitor, Mr. Barnard, if you would be so kind," Captain Drysdale said. With a sigh he returned to his manifests.

Outside the cabin, Hoare and Barnard eyed each other. "Well, sir?" Hoare asked.

Barnard counted to himself. "There are not that many, I'm glad to say. There's the crew of the leave boat, of course; that would be eight men and Simpkins, cox. Two of the mids, Blenkiron and Fallowes. Gamage the purser, McTavish our lieutenant of marines, Grimes—he's surgeon. And Tregallen, of course, if you want to count him. That makes fourteen—no, fifteen in all."

"I suppose that the purser, the surgeon, and the mids berth in the cockpit, and Mr. McTavish in the wardroom?"

Barnard nodded.

"I'll question them there. But let me talk with the man Simpkins first. If he can convince me his men were under his eye at all times, I should not need to question them."

"That, at least, would be a small kindness, Mr. Hoare. It don't please me at all, you may be sure, to have any of my people taken away from their duties when we're making ready for sea. Kindly be brief with them all."

"Of course," Hoare said.

"Pass the word for Simpkins," Barnard called to the ship at large. The coxswain's name went forward like a moving echo. Soon a regulation barefooted bronzed British tar appeared, knuckled his forehead, and looked apprehensively at his officer.

"Ah, Simpkins," Barnard drawled. "Mr. Hoare here is from the port admiral. He has some questions to ask you. Answer them, and truthfully, mind. Now, sir, I'll be about my own affairs, if you please. We sail tomorrow morning, on the flood."

Before Barnard could turn away, Hoare recalled him. He did not care for the other's attitude toward his visitor—or, for that matter, his top-lofty way towards his shipmates. He would give him a taste of his own medicine.

"Be so kind as to clear the cockpit of its present occupants and have the others you named assemble outside it—outside, mind. If I need to question Simpkins' men, I will have him muster them. Thank you; that will be all for now."

Now it was Hoare who turned away dismissively. He could almost smell Barnard fuming at being ordered about by this whispering admiral's poppet and hugged himself in secret glee. He knew he was being unfair to a harried fellow officer, but he could not help envying the man. With his ship, Barnard was preparing to go in harm's way, and perhaps fame's way with it, while he, Bartholomew Hoare, had to hang about ashore, mutely hauling smelly corpses about. It was not fair.

"Yes, sir?" Simpkins was waiting. He looked much afraid.

"You cox the leave boat, I'm told."

"Aye, sir, I did, but we're disbanded now; preparin' fer sea, ye know. All shore leave stopped, all hands aboard."

"Of course. And you row eight oars?"

"Aye, sir."

"How do you handle them while you're ashore?"

"Handle 'em, sir?" Simpkins asked. "Beggin' yer parding, sir, but I don't handle 'em at all. I don't get yer drift."

"Which men do you keep within sight, and which ones do you let off now and then for—shall we say—a spot of refreshment?" Hoare was sure he knew the answer, but the question must be asked.

"In *this* ship, sir? Nary a man gets further away from the boat than to ease 'imself in case of need. Never. There's them as 'ud take advantage of me like an' drink 'emselves pukin' before I could wink. Or even run. An' if I lost one of me crew . . . oh my God, sir, not in this ship."

"Then your men were within eyesight at all times whenever you had them in charge ashore?"

"Aye, sir. Bless my soul, yes." Simpkins could not have looked more sincere.

He was scared green of his first lieutenant, Hoare thought, and none of his oarsmen would have had the wherewithal to bribe him.

"An' me, too, sir," Simpkins added hastily before Hoare could ask him. "I was always in their sight, I mean. Oh my God yes, sir."

"Very good, Simpkins. Thank you. Now show me to the cockpit, if you please."

Simpkins started as if no officer had ever said "please" to him before, but took Hoare below to the orlop, where he left him at the foot of a ladder. Before the low entrance to *Severn's* cockpit several men, including one in the scarlet and gold of a marine officer, loitered. The news was out, then.

"Thank you for waiting, gentlemen," Hoare whispered. Without preamble, he took out the peculiar purse.

"Do any of you recognize this?"

"It's the master's, sir," said one of the midshipmen. "It held a bull's bollocks. He was used to say that what was in it now meant just as much to him as those bollocks meant to the bull that once owned it."

"Mr. Barnard has told me that all of you were ashore in the last few days, either on ship's business or your own. I wish to speak with each of you privately."

A portly, blotched, soft-looking man spoke up. "Perhaps my shipmates would let me precede them, sir, so that I may return to my duties."

"You would be Mr. Gamage?" Hoare asked.

"Ernest Gamage, sir, at your service."

"Very good, Mr. Gamage. After you, if you please." Hoare ushered him into the cockpit.

Hoare's own first quarters at sea had been crannies like this—

sometimes smaller, sometimes larger, but always fetid, always cluttered, always dark. Four narrow, shuttered berths and as many hammocks crowded the space. Some of the occupants' sea chests served as seats, others as a table. In action, Hoare knew, the latter would be cleared for Grimes the surgeon and the loblolly boys who would hold down the patients and cart away the lopped-off limbs and their former owners. Now the makeshift table was littered with the surgeon's tools—probes, retractors, saws, a peculiar object that resembled a thumbscrew but Hoare knew was a trephine, a few scalpels. A compact chest sat empty on one corner. Apparently Mr. Grimes had been interrupted in a last-minute inventory of his equipment.

Hoare shoved the instruments to one side. They were filthy, unsightly, and he did not want them under his eye. He needed no distractions now; once again he was—figuratively speaking—at sea. Once again he wished he had withstood the call of curiosity last night and left Dr. Dunworthy in the dark to shout his lungs out.

"I understand, sir," he whispered, "that you were ashore lately and that you returned aboard only last night. Pray tell me where you went, whom you saw, and what you did while there."

According to Mr. Gamage, his run ashore had been humdrum. He had arranged to have a supply of slops put aboard *Severn* so he could replace crew's clothing that might have worn beyond repair or simply gone adrift. For selling in the wardroom he had arranged for a small supply of better-grade tobacco, some soft soap, and some Bohea tea.

On his first night Gamage had made a fourth at whist in the home of a reputable ship's chandler. He had dossed down in a corner of his host's parlor. His second day had been much the same as the first.

"And the Saturday night?"

Mr. Gamage's glance strayed into the dim corners of the cockpit.

"I entertained myself in a private manner, sir."

Hoare pressed him.

"If 'twas *your* last night ashore, sir, what would *you* have done?" The purser winked broadly. "Need I said more to a fellow officer?"

Obviously Mr. Gamage had enjoyed a last orgy of a dignified sort at some such establishment as the One More Round—one that served all sexual tastes and hence would be favored by the naval establishment's older members. Given his name, Hoare was sensitive to matters of sexual impropriety, so he let the matter pass.

Gamage was quite sure that it was his first night ashore that he had encountered Mr. Blenkiron and Mr. Fallowes. All hands had been more than half seas over. No, Mr. Gamage had not acknowledged the young gentlemen; they were mere children, after all, and he was happy to leave them to their own filth.

This interested Hoare, and he demanded details. He sensed that the purser merely wanted the chance to tattle.

"I cannot feel that their—er—behavior in—ah—private matters is in keeping with the traditions of the service," Mr. Gamage said.

"Kindly be more specific, sir," Hoare whispered.

"I refer to the sin of Onan, sir. And—worse—to that other abomination, the one mentioned in the Articles of War."

Hoare suspected that Mr. Gamage might be displeased less by the amatory activities of *Severn's* mids as by his own nonparticipation in them. He was about to dismiss the purser when a further question came to mind. It might be useful; heaven knew nothing else seemed to be.

"What sort of a man was Mr. Tregallen?" he asked.

Mr. Gamage hesitated.

"A good seaman, sir—none better. As good a navigator as our captain; in fact, he was the officer who taught our young gentlemen, and a hard taskmaster he was, I heard them say. A prudent sailor, too, he was, generally ready to take in sail before the other officers thought it needful. Or so I heard. Self-educated I'm sure, for I know he sailed before the mast in the seventies."

"And as a man?"

Again the purser hesitated.

"He was fond of a wager, always urgent to be paid and slow to pay. I had no use for him. In a word, he was a liar. He made unwarranted charges. He ruined more than one man's career. You might speak to McTavish about him, or Grimes."

"I shall, Mr. Gamage," Hoare said, and dismissed him. "Be so kind as to ask Mr. Grimes to step in."

Gamage turned in the doorway for a last word.

"I'm glad the bastard's dead, Mr. Hoare."

No sooner was Grimes seated across from Hoare than he slapped the covered chests between them. "Someone has been meddling with my instruments," he said. "*No one* meddles with my instruments."

"I moved your instruments, sir," Hoare whispered. "They were in my way. Besides, they were disgusting to look upon, and I wanted them out of my sight. Why do you not wash them?"

"Wash them?" Grimes laughed with ill-concealed contempt. "Why should I do a thing like that? Every properly apprenticed surgeon knows better than to clean off his instruments; cleaning removes the protective film of blood. Wipe them off, indeed!"

"Never mind. I believe you were ashore for several days during the last week. Kindly tell me what you did and whom you met."

Like the purser, *Severn's* surgeon had spent the day completing his supplies—equipment, medicines, ointments, and the like. The port surgeon, Davis, would confirm this, as would the several apothecaries upon whom he had called.

"The first night I spent at the Blue Posts," said Grimes.

"And whom did you meet there?"

"Meet? No one. There was a band of noisy Scots upstairs, making as much ado as so many Mohocks, so I decided to betake myself to the country in search of peace. I rambled about the rural environs for the remainder of my brief leave, botanizing and living rough."

"What sort of shipmate was Mr. Tregallen?" Hoare asked.

"A fine seaman, though who am I to judge? Not an easy man to know. Intelligent? Yes. Ambitious? Yes. Demanding; just ask the mids. He would have made a bad enemy."

"How so?"

"Things went only one way with Mr. Tregallen; he took, but I never knew him to give. He watched; he watched. When he saw advantage to himself, he moved like lightning.

"That was how he advanced. He came aft through the hawsehole, you know. He left ruined reputations behind him wherever he went, peaching on pilfering petty officers so he could replace them, tempting young gentlemen—and others not so young—into outrageous wagers. He was a bad shipmate, Mr. Hoare, and I confess I do not regret his death. You might ask the same question of the marine officer, or the purser. How did he die, by the way?"

"His throat was cut," Hoare whispered.

"Ah. I would have expected you to say stabbed or bludgeoned."

"How so?"

"He was that sort of a man. Enraging. Ah well . . . *de mortuis*, as we scholars say." Mr. Grimes smiled patronizingly at Hoare. "Will that be all?"

"I shall detain you no longer," he whispered. "As you leave, be so kind as to ask Mr. McTavish to join me."

Sweeping his instruments into the chest on the table and picking up the lot, the surgeon departed.

It having been some obscure Gaelic feast-day, the lobster, Lieutenant McTavish, had forgathered at the Blue Posts with several others of his nation and had his fill of haggis, whisky, and melancholy song. None of the party, he said, had left the inn that night.

Most of the evening was a blank to him. In fact, he had awakened the next day at noon, alone and abandoned, in some inland village, completely at sea as to his whereabouts.

"I confess, sir, I didna know what day it was, let alone what toun. I was that frichtit of havin' missed me ship that I hired a vee-hical—at an unco' price, I tell ye—and retairned to *Severn* forrthweeth.

"The mon was a bad shipmate, bad," the marine said when Hoare asked him about Tregallen. "The fairst evenin' aboard he fills me wi' thot vile liquor he carries, an' the next thing I knaw, I've geeven him me note o' hand for mair guineas than I've sichtit me life lang. An' he kept dunnin' me for it. He kept havin' at me an' at me. Well, I'm free

of *that* the noo. An' I wasna the only mon he troubled so," he added. "Ye might ha asked Muster Gamage or the sawbones about that."

"Who could vouch for your whereabouts while ashore, Mr. McTavish?" Hoare whispered.

"The Friday nicht, ony of my fellow Scots, tu be sure, an' the host. Aye, we had a braw set-to there, we did. As tu the Saturday, wull, I canna say. As I told ye, I wasna so bricht mesel'. An' the folk at the inn in the village, where I hired the shay to brring me back tae Portsmouth, I suppose."

"Where was that?"

"I dinna ken."

Mr. McTavish departed to rejoice in being freed of his dubious debt and to send in Blenkiron and Fallowes. The mids shortly appeared in the door, jostled to see who must go first, and finally stood before him.

"Be seated, young gentlemen," Hoare whispered. "Which of you is which?"

"I'm Fallowes, sir," said the taller lad. Fallowes might have been twelve. His wavy blond hair kept falling into his eyes, and he kept brushing it back like a nervous girl.

"I'm Blenkiron, sir. I'm senior, if you please, sir," he added. Blenkiron's voice was still uncertain whether to sing tenor or treble.

"Tell me about Mr. Tregallen," Hoare whispered.

Blenkiron's face turned white.

"He was worse than Mr. Barnard and the sawbones. And he was quartered here, too, right with us."

"No escape for a poor snotty."

"Shut up, you ass."

There was another pause. "What do you mean by that?" Hoare asked.

"Nothing, sir," came in chorus, and neither young gentleman would be moved further.

"What did you do ashore?" Hoare asked at last. The two looked at each other.

"Well, we met these two ladies . . ." began Fallowes.

They admitted to having awakened the next day in a strange, smelly bed with their pockets to let. They had not seen Tregallen.

There being no more to do aboard *Severn*, Hoare decided, he betook himself ashore. For the gig's return to the Sally Port in the growing dusk, he left the tiller to its rightful coxswain and took the time to review the meager results of his amateur questioning.

Could the two mids have killed their persecutor? Certainly the ill will was evident, but so was manifest fear. Even combined, the two would have been mice to Tregallen's cat. Forget the mids.

Grimes had been wandering about inland. He could have killed Tregallen. But why?

Dunworthy must be innocent, for he had had no real need to call for Hoare's help to move his "corpus."

McTavish was badly in debt to the master, so he would have had a reason to kill him. He claimed that somewhere in the Dorsetshire countryside he had gone adrift—an oxymoron if there ever was one; might the village where he awoke have been Bishops Waltham?

As for Gamage the purser, he had stayed in Portsmouth—he had said—all the time he was ashore and could not have gotten the body to Bishops Waltham.

Hoare considered the tasks he must perform ashore.

"When is tomorrow's first flood tide?" he asked the coxswain.

"That 'ud be four bells of the mornin' watch, sir. Ten o'clock."

The cox's voice, and his condescending translation of the time for this lubberly officer, showed more than a trace of scorn; any real seaman, he clearly thought, would always have the state of the tide in his bones.

Eighteen hours. Hoare had no more than that before *Severn* and all his suspects save one would be effectively out of his reach. Not a minute was to be lost. He would be left with that single suspect, one portly, middle-aged doctor whose motive for the murder was a feeble thing indeed.

Nevertheless he owed it to the common law to persuade the civilian authorities of Hampshire to arrest Dr. Dunworthy as suspect of murder. While doing so, he must comb through all the almost infinite number of haunts that Tregallen might have frequented.

This nightmarish tangle was only getting worse as he yanked at it. A corpus with its throat cut; the tracks so plain in the mud under the bridge but so obscure to interpret; the peculiar scrotal purse; two frightened, sullen midshipmen; an embittered marine; two medicos—Dunworthy the body-snatching doctor and Grimes the top cock in his own cockpit; an oddly deceptive message about a "corpus." Hoare felt that all he could do was jerk feebly and hopelessly at his tangle until his time ran out, *Severn* made her offing behind the Foreland, and he must face his merciless admiral, charged with having failed to do his utmost.

He plodded first to the Town Hall, where he put his case for arresting Dr. Dunworthy before a bored functionary. At last the man scribbled on a form and called a minion—a bailey? a shreeve?—to go to Durley Street by Bishops Waltham and seize the portly physician. Then he plodded on. At the Bunch of Grapes, where Tregallen *had* been seen and which he had saved for last, no one answered his hammering at the door.

His own quarters at the Swallowed Anchor lay not far away. Wearily, Hoare made use of his key to enter the sleeping inn and fell on his bed fully clothed, telling himself to awaken at sunrise.

The morning sun in Hoare's eyes woke him with a start. God, it must be gone eight bells—and *Severn* due to catch the flood. Dashing ice-cold water into his face, he raced below.

"No time, Susan, no time," he whispered to the pink girl who bore his breakfast of bread and brawn. "Was there a ship's master in the inn two nights ago, or three?"

"I don't think so, sir. Pa! Mr. Hoare wants to know 'as there been a ship's master in the inn these past two nights?"

"Nay, lass, no master, not last night," came the answer from the kitchen.

Hoare departed at a near-run for the Bunch of Grapes. If he failed there, he was left with inquiring at a few down-at-heel shebeens where no self-respecting ship's master would have set foot—and he had no time, no time.

Mr. Greenleaf of the Bunch had just opened his doors and was sweeping out last night's trash. Yes, he remembered seeing Mr. Tregallen; he knew him well. He had sat at that table in the back, and another man had joined him. Hoare's heart lifted; the tangle was about to come unraveled after all, and nearly an hour remained before flood tide.

Mr. Greenleaf could say for certain that Tregallen's companion was tall, but he had been that moithered; a tussle had come up among some of the other patrons, and by the time he had taken care of the matter the stranger had gone.

Mr. Tregallen had paid the reckoning for himself and his friend and left. It was then that the inn's own horse and chaise, which Mr. Greenleaf had rented out to another patron, had disappeared, leaving both the patron and Mr. Greenleaf bereft. In fact, were it not for a friend of Greenleaf's boy, it would have been the last of his horse and chaise because yesterday morning the friend came to tell the boy he had glimpsed the equipage standing just off the Sally Port, unattended and all bespraggled with blood.

Hoare's heart sank again. Yes, Tregallen had met a friend, but who had he been? He started out the inn door and nearly collided with a barefoot girl-child who ran athwart his hawse in hot pursuit of a kitten.

"You, Jenny!" came a woman's voice from within. "You coom back 'ere, or I'll tell yer da and 'e'll wup yer little arse off!"

Within seconds the child trotted back again, triumphantly lugging her kitten. "You tell me da, an' I'll cut yer into pieces when I grow up, that I will!" she shrilled. Child and pet vanished into the darkness of the inn.

For what seemed like an eternity Hoare stood transfixed, the chance words ringing through his head. The tangle in his mind was suddenly gone—cut into pieces.

He returned to the *Hard* on the run. The gig he had used before was at leisure, but another officer was approaching, looking eager. Hoare pulled out the boatswain's pipe, he used in emergencies and, nearly breathless, blew the "Still." Instinct stopped the other officer in his tracks; by mere feet Hoare got to the gig first and boarded it, disregarding the other's outraged howl. "*Severn* again, lads! And pull for all you're worth!" he croaked. His throat exploded in agony, and he collapsed, coughing, in the stern sheets while the oarsmen bent to their work as if rowing for the Head of the Fleet prize.

As Hoare came up to *Severn*, all hands and the cook were heaving the capstan round to the squeal of a fiddle. Her main topsail and headsails were already beginning to draw, her boarding ladder hauled in. Hoare wasted no time trying to hail for it to be put overside again but gave a huge leap. Catching the chain-plates of her star-board main shrouds, he pulled himself aboard, shredding the knees of his breeches on the channel as he went and leaving two red-stained patches of white nankeen behind. Captain Drysdale and his first lieutenant stared down from the frigate's quarterdeck.

"Damn you, sir!" Barnard exploded, "keep your damned blood off my bloody deck! What is it now?"

"Vast weighing!" Hoare croaked. "I've found your master's killer, and he's aboard *Severn*!"

With this, his damned throat gave out, and he bent over, supporting himself with his hands on his knees and coughing, coughing.

"Explain yourself, sir," the captain said.

"Grimes, sir," Hoare coughed. "Your surgeon."

"What about him?"

"The master was blackmail—cough—blackmailing him. Grimes cut his throat, took the body inland, and left it—cough—to a local doctor to anatomize. To cut into pieces."

Spoken more or less out loud, here on *Severn*'s quarterdeck, Hoare's words sounded fantastic.

"You have some explaining to do, Mr. Hoare," the captain said. "Mr. McTavish!"

"Sah!"

"Take a man, put the surgeon under arrest, and deliver him to my cabin."

"Sah!"

"Come below, if you please, Mr. Hoare, and let us get to the bottom of this once for all. Pray accompany us, Mr. Barnard."

"Signal from Admiralty House, sir," Blenkinsop said, taking his eye from a telescope. "Reads: 'Why are you still at anchor?'"

"Make 'Submit explanation forthcoming directly,'" sighed Captain Drysdale. "Belay getting under way, Mr. Barnard. I see we must make our excuses to Admiral Hardcastle."

"Ava-a-ast heaving!" Barnard bellowed. Here was one more reason to envy the other officer; he could bellow.

Below, the captain seated himself at his desk. He looked at Hoare. "Now, sir, kindly justify your accusation."

By now Hoare had recovered from his coughing fit. There was no time to explain, no time. Yet, he thought wildly, Captain Drysdale, unwitting, might have a simple, clinching piece of evidence in his possession. He would chance it.

"I can do so immediately, sir," he croaked, "and explain in detail later, if you but have a sample of Mr. Grimes's handwriting."

"I do not, but my clerk will. Morse!"

A door to one side opened, and a pallid man appeared. "Sir?"

"A sample of Mr. Grimes's handwriting, if you please. One of his sick-and-injured reports will do."

There were sounds of struggle outside. The pallid man was replaced by Mr. Grimes, flanked by two marine guards. From the surgeon's appearance he had, Hoare saw, not come along willingly.

"I demand to know, sir . . ." Grimes began.

"Silence, you," said McTavish.

"Mr. Hoare here bears an accusation against you, Mr. Grimes," the captain said, "of murder. What have you to say?"

"Absurd. The man's mad. Or drunk."

The pallid Morse returned with a paper in hand. "Mr. Grimes's report, sir," he said. "Casualties resulting from our encounter with *Corse*."

"Pray give it to Mr. Hoare here."

Hoare took the paper eagerly. He reached into his pocket for the message Dr. Dunworthy had given him.

"By your leave, sir," Hoare placed the two papers on Captain Drysdale's desk. Good fortune stared back at him. "Kindly look here, sir, at these two words." He placed one finger on each of the papers.

Grimes wrenched himself from his guards' grip and stood erect, or rather attempted to do so. His head struck the frigate's overhead a stunning blow, and he collapsed to the deck as if poleaxed. The surgeon might have been at sea for some time, Hoare thought, but not during his formative years. He had not learned to keep his head *down* when below-decks, come what may.

"Pick him up and sit him down, McTavish," the captain said. "I won't have him bleeding all over my Turkey carpet." He returned to the papers at which Hoare still pointed. "'I've a corpus for you,'" he read from one, "'if you come to the place marked on the map. Bring the usual.'"

"And this sentence, sir, from the casualty report?"

"The corpus of our only casualty, Dimmick, foretopman, was committed . . . 'Corpus. The same word, by Jove, and in the same hand. How the devil did you know, Hoare?"

"I think we shall find that Tregallen was blackmailing three different shipmates—Gamage the purser, McTavish the lobster, Grimes the surgeon," Hoare whispered. "We know that all three were ashore when he was killed. The first two as much as admitted to me that they were being blackmailed, a thing they would never have done had either been the one who disposed of his blackmailer. Grimes made no such admission."

Hoare paused again for breath and another mad guess. "I am certain Dr. Dunworthy of Durley Street will recognize your surgeon as having attended his lecture the other night. The rest, sir, you just observed yourself."

Captain Drysdale shifted his gaze from the papers to his surgeon.

"What have you to say for yourself, Mr. Grimes?" he said.

The surgeon mopped the blood from his forehead. "Mr. Hoare has me to rights, sir," he said. "The master had turned the tables on *me*; he was bleeding *me* white. He was buggering me. I had no choice."

Despite all questioning he refused to state the event or events that the late Mr. Tregallen had threatened to reveal.

"It would do no one any good, sir, and could wreak great harm," he said at last.

His captain directed the others to follow him onto the quarterdeck, where he summoned Blenkiron.

"Make to Admiralty House: 'Surgeon murdered master. Submit convene court-martial forthwith, this ship.' And to the port surgeon: 'Request replacement surgeon forthwith.'"

Mr. Blenkiron stared at Hoare. Behind the midshipman's astonishment, Hoare sensed, lay a profound relief.

Septimus Grimes's court-martial took place in *Severn's* cabin with Dr. Dunworthy the principal witness. The verdict was a foregone conclusion. As a mere warrant officer, the surgeon was not to be accorded the courtesy generally granted to commissioned officers, of being shot; instead, he was sentenced to dangle and strangle at *Severn's* yardarm.

"You knew Dr. Dunworthy, then," Hoare said as he kept Grimes company during the surgeon's last hours.

"I did not precisely know him, sir. I learned of the medical meeting in Bishops Waltham and attended his absurd lecture on the interrelationship of various glands in the human body. I had no difficulty in concluding that he was an active anatomizer, and his sponsor had announced his domicile upon introducing him.

"As you can imagine, my mind was already attuned to the question of silencing my persecutor. How to do it presented no problem; I am deft enough and strong enough, and of course the weapon—one of my scalpels—was ready to hand.

"The principal problem was how to dispose of the body. I had to do the deed now; I could not wait until we were at sea and simply put the man overboard one night after cutting his throat. He was far too experienced a seaman for that.

"So when at last I put anatomization together with my crying need, it became obvious. What better way of disposing of my blackmailer than handing him over to be dissected by a respected if eccentric physician? It would be he who must bury the inconvenient evidence with a prayer—after, mind you, having cut it into pieces in the course of his research so that, if found, it could not be identified. A far better solution than simply heaving Tregallen into the harbor, just to float ashore in a day or so.

"It was easy enough to entice the man into the inn's chaise the next night with promises of gold. Then all I need do was slit his throat, drive the corpus to Bishops Waltham, strip it for Dunworthy, drag it under the bridge, and leave a message under the doctor's door as I returned.

"Had you not boarded us," Grimes concluded, "*Severn* would have been at sea within minutes, and I would have been out of your reach. I planned to leave the ship at Gibraltar and go to ground in Spain."

"And the subject of the blackmail?"

"I shall go to my grave, sir—a watery one, I fear—without revealing that. Bearing a suggestive name like yours, you must know the burden the slightest open sign of sexual impropriety imposes on any officer, or warrant officer. I will not burden others in that way; there is enough on my conscience already. Now sir: How did you come to lay the deed at my door?"

"You must blame an errant kitten, Mr. Grimes."

An hour later, Hoare stood on *Severn's* quarterdeck to see her crew run her surgeon aloft, long legs kicking wildly, to her main yardarm.

"We are still shy our master, sir," Mr. Barnard reminded his captain when the legs had ceased their hopeless reach for the ground and the officers resumed their hats.

"Well, we shall have to make shift without, you and I. Or perhaps Mr. Hoare himself would stoop . . ."

Hoare's heart leapt. Step down though it would be, he would gladly accept the post and sacrifice his belongings ashore to boot if it would get him to sea again.

"He can't talk, sir." Barnard spoke across Hoare as if he were deaf as well as mute.

"Of course. Pity."

The captain turned away and joined his lieutenant in the ritual of putting to sea. Left unceremoniously alone, Hoare once again damned the Frenchman who had killed his voice and his career at sea.

As he turned to clamber down into the waiting gig, he espied Dr.

Dunworthy standing at the rail and offered him a lift ashore. The physician looked at him strangely, then followed him down the boarding ladder.

"I am happy to have had a part in clearing you, sir," Hoare said.

"And equally happy, I doubt not, sir," Dunworthy said bitterly, "to leave me bereft of my reputation in my community and in my profession."

"Do you imagine that the medical society will listen to a paper given by a suspected murderer? Do you imagine that word of my disgrace will not have already filled the neighborhood? Henceforth, thanks to your meddling, I shall see nothing of my former patients except their backs. I shall have to beg for my breakfast in the streets. Or go to sea as a surgeon. At my age and in my condition. Thanks to you. A dirty road to you, sir, and a slow journey. And take your damned happiness with you."

For the rest of the row across the harbor, the two passengers ignored each other.

Hoare turned to see *Severn* slowly gather way.

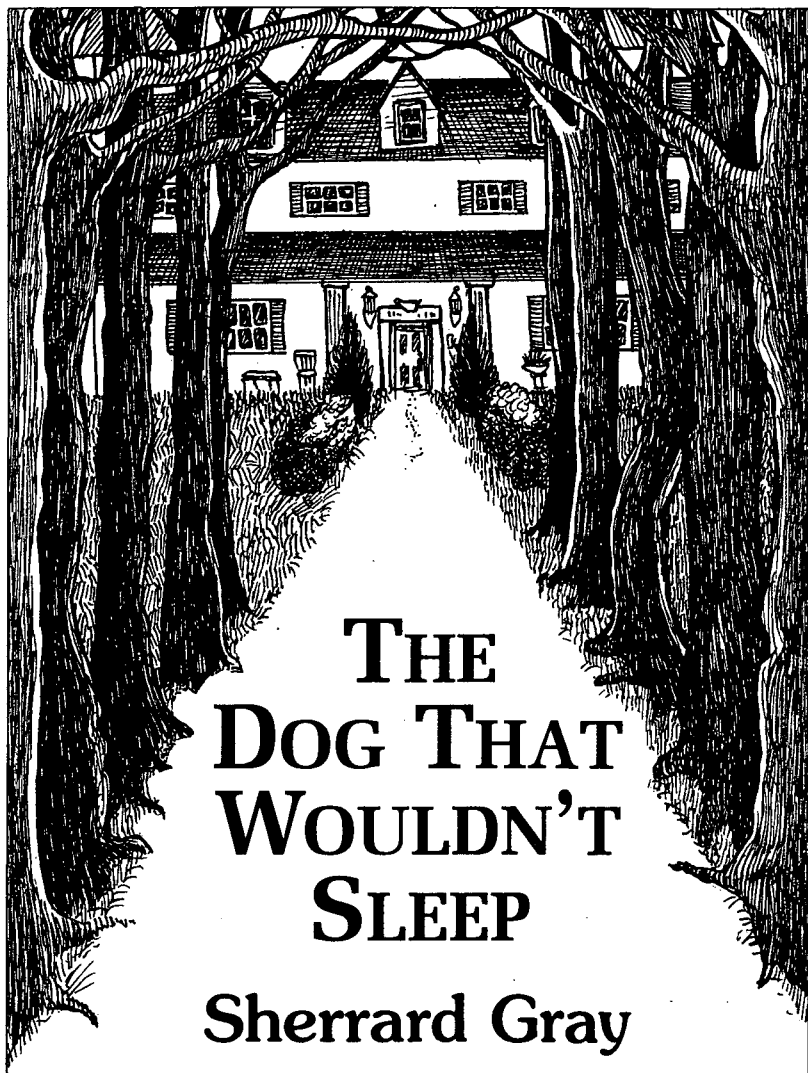
"Come cheer up, my lads," he recited to himself, "'tis to glory we steer!"

To glory, indeed. But he, Bartholomew Hoare, must remain behind and watch them go.

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THE DOG THAT WOULDN'T SLEEP

Sherrard Gray

Before visiting the old house outside Ravensburg he decided to swing by Tanguay Field in the next lot where, seventeen years ago, he'd hit that terrific shot. "A towering drive," the sportswriter for the *Ravensburg Gazette* had called it

(in the same edition, the story of his stepmother's death had run on the front page).

He pulled off the paved road onto the grass behind the batting cage and stepped out. A handful of kids were hitting fungoes to each other. The splintery bench-



es he'd known as a fourteen-year-old had been replaced by pressure-treated posts and two-by-ten planks, and along the first baseline where the spectators (all twelve of them) used to stand were wooden bleachers. But the maple and spruce woods between the two properties were still there and so were the distant blue-tinted mountains.

He swallowed hard—memories of past glory can both excite and depress—waved to a boy shagging flies in his old position, right field, got a blank stare in return, and climbed back into his car.

That part was easy. The hardest part of the memory trip was about to begin: the house.

Going up the gravel drive between the two rows of sugar maples, he remembered shooting cap pistols behind those trees with his pals Tim Hurst and Dennis McClaran, and smooching behind that double-trunked maple with Gina Day, but as he got closer to the house where he'd spent a third of his life, the memories grew darker. He drove into the turnaround and slowed down. The three story mansion rose overhead, its dormers and slate-capped turrets stark against the sky. More like a castle than a home. He'd moved in with his father and stepmother when he was four years old, a year after his mother had died of cancer. Ten years in that house with his father and Lillian. And then, after the gardener had cracked Lillian's skull on the stairs with an

axe handle, two more months alone with his father, who was drinking heavily (especially after learning that Lillian had left all her money to her sister), tossing down a bottle of gin a night, finally losing his job and the house (the bank repossessing it) and the two of them moving in with a sister of his father's in Arizona.

The question he still couldn't answer was why his father had married that shrew. His dad who was full of life and fun to be with, except when he'd been drinking, who had a dream of someday quitting the insurance business and becoming, late in life, like the great French primitivist Henri Rousseau, a painter. He could have pulled it off, he had the flair that such a bold change requires. But he didn't. She kept him back; savaged his self-esteem.

"Oh, Morris," she'd say, blowing smoke and laughing, "what gives you the silly notion you can paint?"

Someone was stepping out of the house onto the porch between the Doric columns. A youngish, attractive woman in khakis and a white shirt with rolled up sleeves was giving him a puzzled look. Chase felt an urge to turn around and drive back, let sleeping dogs lie, but something made him stop the car and get out.

"Yes?" The woman stayed on the top step of the porch, the breeze fanning out her long, honey-hued hair. A small curly head peeped around the jamb behind her.

"I'm Chase Whitcomb."

The woman's face stayed blank.



"I'm sorry, that name doesn't ring a bell."

"I used to live in this house. Seventeen years ago."

She scrutinized him more closely, and a foreboding blew through him like a damp wind. He had not had a normal life in this house. Could the woman standing before him—and the six- or seven-year-old girl hiding behind her—be happy here? He wanted to tell her to leave, move to a smaller house, a condo, an apartment, a rundown old farmhouse, anything but this looming palace.

She gave him a tentative smile. "You'd like to see your old home again, is that it?" Chase hesitated, jamming his hands into his pockets. "Would you like to come in? My name is Sarah Petrovsky." Her smile was warmer now, less guarded. As he followed her inside, the little girl, with a half-giggle, half-scream, ran behind the newel post, then peered out with an elfin expression, and in spite of his uneasiness, the visitor laughed. But before the laughter had died on his lips, he told himself, *Leave! Now!*

The child came up to him. "Would you like to see my dolls?" "Sure."

"Lucy, Mr. Whitcomb has come to see the house, not your dolls. He used to live here."

"Oh." Lucy squinted up at him from under yellow curls. "Did you sleep upstairs?"

"Yes." When I was able to sleep, that is.

Impulsively the mother asked, "Did you know the woman who

was . . ." She looked down at her daughter and patted her head. "Honey, why don't you go upstairs and play with your dolls."

The child put her hands on her hips and assumed a stern, adult expression. "So you can talk about the woman who was murdered?"

"Lucy!"

"It's all right, Mummy; I don't have bad dreams about it any more." With a wave to Chase, she scampered up the stairs, green Keds flashing on a wine-red carpet.

But *I* do, he thought. To the mother he said, "Lillian Whitcomb was my stepmother."

"Oh my goodness." The smooth face with its wide, appealing mouth paled. "You were living here when she . . . when it happened?" He nodded as she led him into the living room.

She gestured at an armchair by a fireplace of birch logs. Taking a seat on the edge of the chair, Chase asked, "Have you lived here long, Mrs. Petrovsky?"

"Oh yes. My husband and I bought the house fourteen years ago from the bank. They rented to another family for three years and then sold to us."

Chase made no effort to hide his surprise. "You hardly look old enough to've been here that long."

"I was a child bride. Eighteen. Young and foolish." She laughed, and then her face darkened. "It didn't work out. I'm alone now with Lucy." For a long moment she stared at the unlit logs in the hearth and then turned back to

him. "Were you at home when it happened?"

"No. I was playing baseball at Tanguay Field in a league we had. A policeman drove up, walked out to my position in right field, and said I had to go home with him."

That was about all he could remember of that day, a potbellied cop walking through the outfield grass, nightstick swinging against his hip, the other players turning to stare. The cop didn't look angry or disgusted, as if he were going to arrest him for shoplifting that bubblegum from the Rite Way Drugstore. He looked sad. Almost crying. A policeman almost crying? What was going on?

Vaguely he remembered riding home with the cop, seeing another squad car and a dark green van parked in front of his house, the cop heaving a sigh. "How old are you, Chase?" the cop asked. "Fourteen, sir." "Yeah. Well, I've got some news that's gonna age you pretty quick. Your stepmum is dead. Someone bashed her head in." And that was about all he remembered of that day, except his father coming home two hours later and a different cop telling *him* the news.

He couldn't even remember what Lillian's sister Elana had said to him. She and Lillian were inseparable, got together almost every day, and it was she who'd found the body. Elana, a tense, excitable woman, must have been weeping and tearing her hair out, but it was all a blank in his head. But two days later wasn't a blank, a Saturday afternoon when

the cops came back and arrested his father, said he couldn't establish where he'd been during the murder. He claimed he'd left the insurance office in Ravensburg and driven into the country with his sketchbook, but no one was able to verify this.

And then, a day later, he remembered the flood of relief when the gardener, Aldon Sweetner, confessed, tears rolling down his leathery face as he said he couldn't bear to see that woman slowly killing Mr. Whitcomb, driving him to drink and ruin, and had split her skull with an axe handle. Aldon had showed the police the remains of the handle in the incinerator.

Chase straightened in his chair. "To tell the truth, I wasn't overwhelmed with grief. We didn't get along that well. I resented her for browbeating my father. He dreamt of being a painter, but she made him stay in insurance, told him he had no talent whatsoever for art." He felt the old anger clog his throat. Didn't it ever let go? "I believe he had a gift for drawing and the necessary passion. With a little encouragement he would've made a fine painter." He stopped, his voice hoarse with emotion.

Something in the woman's expression, a stranger's sympathy, loosened his tongue. She had such an innocent, vulnerable air that he wanted to say be careful here. This house has bad vibes. "My father hated his job, started leaving the office more and more, would drive out to the country



with his sketchpad or sometimes just wander around town on foot." He glanced down at the aquamarine pile rug. "Sometimes in his wanderings he'd . . . well, he'd end up in a bar. One day, shortly before her death, he came home with a few too many under his belt. She snatched the pad from him and said, 'What do we have here? Why, it's the sketchbook of the next Toulouse-Lautrec.' My father lunged to get it back, but she danced away, flipping the pages. 'There's nothing here,' she said. 'It's empty. Wait! Here's a house. Oh, how cute, with its own little door and window. And a little kitty on the front lawn. No, that's not a kitty, is it? It's a puppy. Why, of course it is.' And laughing till the tears streamed down her face, she handed the pad back to my father. 'Here, Morris. I mean Toulouse. Thanks so much for sharing these gems with us.'"

The daughter skipped into the room, showed the visitor two dolls, one of which could say "I'm thirsty" and "Have a good day" when its back was pressed, and ran out again. From her perch on the sofa, the woman stared at him intently.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get carried away talking about her."

"I guess you weren't the only person who didn't care for her. The gardener must not've liked her, either, to shoot her like that."

"He didn't shoot her. He bludgeoned her with an axe handle."

There was a gasp from the sofa. "Actually, I think I knew that

but had put it out of my mind. The gardener's been out of jail for a while now." She looked out the window toward a large butternut tree in the side lawn, a swing dangling from a lower branch. My God, he thought, I had a swing on that same limb. "I thought it strange," she said, "that he came back to this town and started a nursery. You'd think he'd move to another county at least."

Chase gave a bitter laugh. "I was the one who moved away. Arizona, Pennsylvania, and now Brattleboro. I seem to be coming closer to Ravensburg with each move."

"Married?"

"For a year. I haven't been very good at relationships. I know this sounds funny but—" He looked at her soft hazel eyes, again surprised at how comfortable he felt with her. "Why am I telling you all this?"

She shrugged. "What sounds funny?"

"Something is holding me back from having a trusting relationship with a woman. Something inside me and, God help me, I don't know what it is." Embarrassed, Chase looked at a floor-to-ceiling bookcase. "I'm sorry."

"S okay."

A tattoo of feet down the stairs and the little girl ran into the room. "Do you want to see my treehouse?"

"Lucy," said her mother.

"Oh, Mummy, chill out."

Chase laughed, then stood. "If it's all right with you, Mrs. Petrovsky?"

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She nodded, and he and Lucy went outside into the cool September air that smelled of apples and fallen leaves and goldenrod.

"The treehouse is down there." Lucy pointed to a tall white pine.

Walking down, he remembered the tree, much smaller then, and the brook with the footbridge over it that led into the woods. He had spent many happy hours fishing that brook, or just sitting on the bank watching the leaf shadows dancing on the water. They climbed wooden slats nailed to the trunk and stepped out onto a roofed platform. A railing circled the platform; two plastic egg crates served as chairs.

"Neat," said Chase.

"You like it?"

"You bet. Who built it?"

"Crystal's dad helped us. Crystal's my friend. You'll meet her someday."

Chase frowned. He was only here for a short visit.

The child picked at the railing with her finger. Brightening, she asked, "Can you stay for supper?"

"I can't. I have some business obligations."

"Oblations?"

"I have to be somewhere else."

"Oh." She went to a makeshift cupboard in one corner of the treehouse and opened the door onto cups, saucers, plates, a cracked ceramic bowl. "At least you can have tea."

Half an hour later the two trooped back to the house. I'm stalling, thought Chase. He needed to see where Lillian was killed,

and yet he was afraid. When he stepped into the high-ceilinged foyer again, the feeling of foreboding crawled back. Mrs. Petrovsky led him into the living room as Lucy ran upstairs.

"That was nice of you. It's good for Lucy too. Her father . . ." She stopped, fingers kneading a seam in her chinos.

Chase waited.

Mrs. Petrovsky smiled. "Now who's confiding in whom? Her father has been a disappointment. Ran off to Seattle with a teller in the bank where he worked. The first six months he sent child support. Now nothing."

"Take him to court."

"I'm no longer interested in his money, or him. Lucy and I get by. I have a good job teaching, and I inherited some money from my mother last year. Enough to pay the taxes and upkeep on this house. I should probably move to a smaller house, but Lucy and I have become attached to this place, and her best friend lives next door. But you didn't come here to hear my troubles. So why did the gardener kill your step-mother? It wasn't just a random thing, was it?"

"Aldon Sweetner loved my father. That's not too strong a word. He'd been arrested years before for killing someone in a bar, served three years, and when he got out, no one wanted anything to do with him. People walked around him on the sidewalk. He couldn't get a job. But my father said the man he killed deserved it. Dad hired him and staked him to a



room in town. Aldon landed a few other gardening jobs, but he spent most of his time here. Took care of this place like it was Buckingham Palace. One day, when he could no longer stomach what Lillian was doing to my father, he snapped. Which is odd because after killing that man in the bar Aldon went out of his way not to harm anything. If he ran over a toad with the lawnmower, he'd brood about it for hours. He never raised his . . . voice . . ."

The woman on the couch leaned toward him. "Are you all right?"

"No. I mean yes." A prickly sensation in the back of his neck. Something was wrong. My God, had Aldon spent twelve years in jail for something he didn't do? Chase sat up, placed his palms on his thighs. "There was a trial. Aldon's lawyer pleaded temporary insanity, but the jury didn't buy it. Found him guilty of second degree murder."

"It all sounds like something out of another century. A servant's love for his master—"

Chase barely heard her; he had turned in his chair and was staring at something behind him. "It happened on those stairs." He nodded toward the sweeping staircase in the hallway. "On the upper landing." Hardly aware of what he was doing, he rose and walked out of the living room, the woman following.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

Without answering, he walked up the stairs. A curly head peeped around the upper banister. The impish smile slid off Lucy's face,

and she ran back into a room at the end of the hallway and closed the door.

He stopped on the landing. Things were coming back to him, the long slow curve of the stairs, the bull's-eye window over the landing. The walls had been repainted and the carpet was different, but everything else was the same, even the musty, lacquerlike smell, and it was jarring loose locked memories. He went to the little window and looked at the belt of woods beyond which lay Tanguay Field. Saw the cop's sad face again. Turning, he saw something he had missed before, and felt the blood drain out of him. A recessed panel above the landing where one of his father's paintings had hung. He saw the painting as if it were still there: a man in blue coveralls raking hay with a team of horses.

"Can I get you something? Coffee? A shot of brandy? It must be painful reliving such a tragedy."

He brushed aside her offer and pointed to a place on the landing. "She was standing right here." He was beyond shaking now; he felt relaxed, the calm after the storm. "Here's where she fell and died."

There was a sharp intake of breath behind him. "How did you know that?"

"I . . . It came out in the trial."

"Oh."

Chase pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. Or thought he did. He wasn't sure what he was doing any more, but a burden had been lifted, some-



thing lodged in his subconscious like a rotten egg was gone. "I hate to impose, Mrs. Petrovsky—"

"Sarah."

"—but if that offer of brandy still holds . . ."

Another patter of feet along the hallway. "Mummy, can Chase stay for supper?"

Sarah Petrovsky looked from her daughter to Chase. "I think you have made a hit. Can you stay?"

"I'd love to but—" Chase wiped his forehead. Seventeen years of unease and confusion had fallen away, but what remained wasn't all peace and serenity. "I need to tell you something first."

Sarah looked at her daughter, who stamped her foot so hard on the top stair that the window rattled. "Grownups," she said stalking off toward her room. "I sure hope I never become one."

Back in the living room, when Sarah asked him to sit down, Chase said, "All right, but you may want me to leave when you hear what I have to say."

She kept her gaze on him and waited.

"The gardener didn't kill Lillian. My father didn't kill Lillian. I killed her."

Sarah's shoulders stiffened as though touched by a gust of cold air, but she said nothing.

The words rushed out of Chase in an avalanche of anguish and relief. "I was playing ball in Tanguay Field and Tim Hurst cracked a bat, the one I liked to use, so I ran home through the woods for this other bat I had. Coming out of my room—Lucy's room—I met

my stepmother on the stairs. She was screaming. 'Mud on my floors! You little tramp. You're a chip off the old block.' 'You mean my father?' I said. 'Yes,' she shouted, 'I mean your worthless daydreaming father, who paints little dabs like this'—she flung her arm toward a painting of his that used to hang above the landing—'and thinks it's art.' That was the last thing, other than a queer little grunt when I hit her, that she ever said. I ran back through the woods, and when I got to the ballfield, my side was still at bat. No one even missed me. Someone said, 'Where the hell you been, tiger? Hitting on one of the girls?' and that was that."

Sarah stared at him from the sofa, eyes wide; a hand lifted off her thigh and dropped back.

"The funny thing is, it was my turn to bat. And I really nailed one, almost knocked it into the brook beyond left field. 'A towering drive,' the sportswriter for the *Gazette* said.

"That's all. I blanked out. For seventeen years this memory has been trying to claw its way to the surface, but I wouldn't let it. Couldn't let it, I guess." His voice grew husky. "It's ruined my life without my even knowing it, silently eating at me. My wife's name was Heather . . ." The room was becoming a blur, the woman on the couch shifting back and forth as if seen from under water. "The breakup wasn't her fault, it was mine."

Quickly he wiped his eyes with his arm. "I'm sorry. When you

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woke up this morning, you didn't think you were going to hear a murderer's confession."

She was on her feet now, a hand on his sleeve. "You aren't a murderer."

"But I killed her. And another man served time. A wonderful, generous man served time because he thought my father had done it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Turn myself in."

"No! You've suffered enough already. Let sleeping dogs lie." Her hand squeezed his wrist with surprising strength.

"I have to do it. But first I want to see Aldon."

He found Aldon at Hillcrest Nursery. The nursery was situated on a hill, acres of potted apple and plum trees, pear, maple, arbor vitae, mugho pine. The potted trees formed neat rows like soldiers on a parade ground. Off to one side stood an old farmhouse, yellow clapboards, asphalt shingles, a small satellite dish partly hidden behind a yew. Aldon stood outside a plastic greenhouse selling some asparagus sets to a gray-bearded man in orange shorts.

"Don't cut the stalks for two years," Aldon said.

"Two years? I'll have one foot in the grave by that time." The customer handed Aldon some money and, carrying his asparagus in a cardboard box, walked toward his van. Passing Chase, he licked his lips. "A little hollandaise sauce? Yum yum."

In spite of himself Chase laughed. Then stopped laughing. Aldon was staring at him. A trowel slid from the nurseryman's hand and clattered onto a slate walkway. His eyes, always dark, looked black, and Chase tensed. The giant—he was six feet six and broad-shouldered—stared at him a full half minute longer and then in a deep, plaintive voice said, "Is it you?"

"Yeah."

"Chase? Chase Whitcomb?" Aldon walked toward him along the slate path. A light drizzle had started to fall, but neither man seemed to notice. Long arms wrapped around Chase.

Aldon stepped back. He'd aged—there were deep circles around the eyes, the thick hair combed back in a wave was pewter gray, the two lines from the nose to the ends of his mouth looked like furrows. He was a little stooped. But the eyes were still clear and fierce. He still had the presence of a Biblical prophet.

"Seventeen years, Chase. You only came to see me once."

"Don't make me feel worse than I already do."

"Why only once?"

"I was afraid."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Could we sit down somewhere? I have something to tell you."

Aldon led him past potted azaleas and lilacs to the house, into a kitchen with a sloped floor like a rolling ship, and started a pot of coffee. They talked briefly about the changes in Ravensburg, the house next to Tanguay Field, its

new owner. Finally, Chase took a deep breath. "I found out what was gnawing at me all these years. You didn't kill Lillian."

"Come on, son. Let's not go over that again."

"I killed her."

Aldon's reaction was loud, immediate, and unexpected. He laughed uproariously.

"You killed her? *You* killed her? Oh man." The big man got up and poured two cups of coffee. The kitchen was a redolent mess, with plants everywhere, the smell of dirt and peat moss and growing things. Smudges of dirt on the windows. A large marmalade cat was draped along the windowsill above the sink like a crumpled beach towel. "You did it? That's rich."

"No, it's sad." Chase told his story, how his memory was jostled walking up that curving staircase, and as he spoke the laughter bled away from Aldon's face. There was the sound of a vehicle outside, a bell ringing, and with a curse the nurseryman rose. "I'll get rid of them." He stepped out, Chase heard a murmur of voices, the vehicle started up again, and Aldon was back.

"I hope you believe me," said Chase, "when I say I honestly didn't know I'd done it. I blanked out."

"I believe you. You wouldn't have let Wildfire down."

For a moment Chase was puzzled, and then remembered how as a kid he used to ride on Aldon's shoulders, pretending he was a Wild West sheriff and the gardener was his horse Wildfire.

Holding onto his thin legs, Aldon would gallop across the lawn and down into the woods, Chase hollering, "We're coming after you, Jesse James."

Aldon got up from the table, stared down at a stack of flats on the counter. "Your father never came to see me, either. And I thought I was keeping him out of jail."

"He couldn't. He thought you killed her, and believe it or not, I think he still loved Lillian. In spite of what she'd done to him. He loved you, too, Aldon; that spark never died. He knew you'd done it for him, and he was deeply moved by that. He once told me, 'He was terribly wrong, but he did it out of love for me.'"

For a minute neither spoke. Another vehicle drove up. Through a small window by the door Chase saw three people climb out of a beige van.

"I really messed up your life."

"No!" Aldon's voice was passionate. "I have a good life. I sleep well, my little sheriff, I sleep well." He put a hand on Chase's shoulder. "You remember that sign your dad had over his desk? 'Today is the first day of the rest of my life.'"

"Yeah." Chase got up from the table. "I'd forgotten that."

He spent the rest of the day with Sarah and Lucy, and it was the happiest time of his life. He played catch with Lucy and pushed her on the swing; the three of them took a walk along the brook and saw a muskrat



slither into the water. Sarah fixed a picnic supper, and they took it to Cob Hill and watched the sun set over the Green Mountains. A burden had been lifted, and he felt free again: food tasted good, air smelled sweet, soft breezes touched his skin like a lover's fingertips. That night he slept in a guest bedroom, and the next morning, after breakfast, he sat on the front steps with Lucy and told her.

The seven-year-old stared at him. "You killed her, Chase?" Tears the size of pearls rolled down her cheeks, her chest shook with sobs.

"I didn't mean to, Lucy. I lost my head. Still, it was wrong, very wrong, and I'm turning myself in."

"To the police?" She dabbed at the tears with her fist. "No. Don't do it," she said, echoing her mother. "Don't say anything."

Chase patted her curly head. "Thanks, Lucy. You've brightened my life, believe me."

The next morning he visited Sarah's lawyer, a man in his forties wearing a tie dotted with little windsurfers. The lawyer listened without a word, pressing his forefingers into his temples and staring at Chase, and when he was finished he said, "All right. That was interesting, even eloquent. But I'm skeptical. Many of these so-called 'recovered memories' turn out to be false. Do you mind if I do a little research before we agree on anything?"

That afternoon the lawyer called back to say he had talked

to Aldon Sweetner and read the trial transcript and would be happy to represent Chase. The lawyer chuckled briefly. "I believe you did it, Mr. Whitcomb. Which is the opposite of what most clients want to hear their attorney say."

"Any idea what I'll get?"

"Well, it's hard to say, but if we can prove that you completely blanked out and haven't been running from the law—and I think we can—I'd guess a five year sentence with two to serve. After all, you were a juvenile at the time, and you thought your stepmother was destroying your father. But that's just a guess."

The next morning Sarah drove him to the Ravensburg police station on Church Street, located in a blocky redstone building dating from the turn of the century. Two police cars parked along the curb; shades drawn on the first-floor windows. Chase, wearing pressed slacks and a clean shirt, got out of the station wagon. Sarah came around to his side.

"Thanks," he said. "For everything. And especially the last two days, which have been the happiest in my life."

"I'll wait for you." She took a quick step and kissed him on the lips, lightly, the brush of a feather. Holding on to the lightness of that kiss, Chase climbed the stone steps, put his hand on the door-knob and pulled. The heavy metal door held for a moment and then gave. He stepped inside. □

MYSTERY CLASSIC

WAS IT A DREAM?

Guy de Maupassant



Illustration by Paul Gilligan

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 11/98

I had loved her madly!

Why does one love? Why does one love? How queer it is to see only one being in the world, to have only one thought in one's mind, only one desire in the heart and only one name on the lips—a name which comes up continually, rising, like the water in a spring, from the depths of the soul to the lips, a name which one repeats over and over again, which one whispers ceaselessly, everywhere, like a prayer.

I am going to tell you our story, for love has only one, which is always the same. I met her and lived on her tenderness, on her caresses, in her arms, in her dresses, on her words, so completely wrapped up, bound and absorbed in everything which came from her that I no longer cared whether it was day or night, or whether I was dead or alive, on this old earth of ours.

And then she died. How? I do not know; I no longer know anything. But one evening she came home wet, for it was raining heavily, and the next day she coughed, and she coughed for about a week and took to her bed. What happened I do not remember now, but doctors came, wrote, and went away. Medicines were brought, and some women made her drink them. Her hands were hot, her forehead was burning, and her eyes were bright and sad. When I spoke to her, she answered me, but I do not remember what we said. I have forgotten everything, everything, everything! She died, and I very well remember her slight, feeble sigh. The nurse said: "Ah!" and I understood; I understood!

I knew nothing more, nothing. I saw a priest who said: "Your mistress?" And it seemed to me as if he were insulting her. As she was dead, nobody had the right to say that any longer, and I turned him out. Another came who was very kind and tender, and I shed tears when he spoke to me about her.

They consulted me about the funeral, but I do not remember anything that they said, though I recollect the coffin and the sound of the hammer when they nailed her down in it. Oh! God, God!

She was buried! Buried! She! In that hole! Some people came—female friends. I made my escape and ran away. I ran and then walked through the streets, went home and the next day started on a journey.

Yesterday I returned to Paris, and when I saw my room again—our room, our bed, our furniture, everything that remains of the life of a human being after death—I was seized by such a violent attack of fresh grief that I felt like opening the window and throwing myself out into the street. I could not remain any longer among these things,

Guy de Maupassant was born in 1850 and died in 1893. He published his first collection of stories in 1881.

between these walls which had enclosed and sheltered her, which retained a thousand atoms of her, of her skin and of her breath, in their imperceptible crevices. I took up my hat to make my escape, and just as I reached the door I passed the large glass in the hall, which she had put there so that she might look at herself every day from head to foot as she went out, to see if her toilet looked well and was correct and pretty, from her little boots to her bonnet.

I stopped short in front of that looking glass in which she had so often been reflected so often, so often, that it must have retained her reflection. I was standing there trembling, with my eyes fixed on the glass—on that flat, profound, empty glass—which had contained her entirely and had possessed her as much as I, as my passionate looks had. I felt as if I loved that glass. I touched it; it was cold. Oh, the recollection! Sorrowful mirror, burning mirror, horrible mirror, to make men suffer such torments! Happy is the man whose heart forgets everything that it has contained, everything that has passed before it, everything that has looked at itself in it or has been reflected in its affection, in its love! How I suffer!

I went out without knowing it, without wishing it, and toward the cemetery. I found her simple grave, a white marble cross, with these few words:

She loved, was loved, and died.

She is there below, decayed! How horrible! I sobbed with my forehead on the ground, and I stopped there for a long time, a long time. Then I saw that it was getting dark, and a strange, mad wish, the wish of a despairing lover, seized me. I wished to pass the night, the last night, in weeping on her grave. But I should be seen and driven out. How was I to manage? I was cunning and got up and began to roam about in that city of the dead. I walked and walked. How small this city is in comparison with the other, the city in which we live. And yet how much more numerous the dead are than the living. We need high houses, wide streets, and much room for the four generations which see the daylight at the same time, drink water from the spring and wine from the vines, and eat bread from the plains.

And for all the generations of the dead, for all that ladder of humanity that has descended down to us, there is scarcely anything, scarcely anything! The earth takes them back, and oblivion effaces them. Adieu!

At the end of the cemetery, I suddenly perceived that I was in its oldest part, where those who had been dead a long time are mingling with the soil, where the crosses themselves are decayed, where possibly newcomers will be put tomorrow. It is full of untended roses, of

strong and dark cypress trees—a sad and beautiful garden, nourished on human flesh.

I was alone, perfectly alone. So I crouched under a green tree and hid myself there completely amid the thick and somber branches. I waited, clinging to the trunk as a shipwrecked man does to a plank.

When it was quite dark, I left my refuge and began to walk softly, slowly, inaudibly, through that ground full of dead people. I wandered about for a long time, but could not find her tomb again. I went on with extended arms, knocking against the tombs with my hands, my feet, my knees, my chest, even with my head, without being able to find her. I groped about like a blind man seeking his way; I felt the stones, the crosses, the iron railings, the metal wreaths and the wreaths of faded flowers! I read the names with my fingers, by passing them over the letters. What a night! What a night! I could not find her again!

There was no moon. What a night! I was frightened, horribly frightened in those narrow paths between two rows of graves. Graves! Graves! Graves! Nothing but graves! On my right, on my left, in front of me, around me, everywhere there were graves! I sat down on one of them, for I could not walk any longer; my knees were so weak. I could hear my heart beat! And I heard something else as well. What? A confused, nameless noise. Was the noise in my head, in the impenetrable night, or beneath the mysterious earth, the earth sown with human corpses? I looked all around me, but I cannot say how long I remained there; I was paralyzed with terror, cold with fright, ready to shout out, ready to die.

Suddenly it seemed to me that the slab of marble on which I was sitting was moving. Certainly it was moving, as if it were being raised. With a bound I sprang onto the neighboring tomb, and I saw, yes, I distinctly saw the stone which I had just quitted rise upright. Then the dead person appeared, a naked skeleton, pushing the stone back with its bent back. I saw it quite clearly, although the night was so dark. On the cross I could read:

*Here lies Jacques Olivant,
who died at the age of fifty-one.
He loved his family, was kind and honorable,
and died in the grace of the Lord.*

The dead man also read what was inscribed on the tombstone; then he picked up a stone off the path, a little pointed stone, and began to scrape the letters off carefully. He slowly effaced them, and with the hollows of his eyes he looked at the place where they had been engraved. Then, with the tip of the bone that had been his fore-

finger, he wrote in luminous letters, like those lines which boys trace on walls with the tip of a lucifer match:

*Here reposes Jacques Olivant, who died at the age of fifty-one.
He hastened his father's death by his unkindness,
as he wished to inherit his fortune;
he tortured his wife, tormented his children,
deceived his neighbors, robbed everyone he could,
and died wretched.*

When he had finished writing, the dead man stood motionless, looking at his work. On turning around I saw that all the graves were open, that all the dead bodies had emerged from them, and that all had effaced the lines inscribed on the gravestones by their relations, substituting the truth instead. And I saw that all had been the tormentors of their neighbors—malicious, dishonest, hypocrites, liars, rogues, calumniators, envious; that they had stolen, deceived, performed every disgraceful, every abominable action, these good fathers, these faithful wives, these devoted sons, these chaste daughters, these honest tradesmen, these men and women who were called irreproachable. They were all writing at the same time, on the threshold of their eternal abode, the truth, the terrible and the holy truth, of which everybody was ignorant, or pretended to be ignorant, while they were alive.

I thought that *she* also must have written something on her tombstone; and now, running without any fear among the half-open coffins, among the corpses and skeletons, I went toward her, sure that I should find her immediately. I recognized her at once without seeing her face, which was covered by the winding sheet; and on the marble cross where shortly before I had read:

She loved, was loved, and died.

I now saw:

*Having gone out in the rain one day
in order to deceive her lover,
she caught cold and died.*

It appears that they found me at daybreak, lying on the grave, unconscious.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Serial killers are often the most interesting characters in the books that feature them, and Jeffery Deaver's title character, known to those chasing him as **The Coffin Dancer** (Simon & Schuster, \$25), ranks right up there with the best of them. This guy is a chameleon with one last amazing, totally unexpected trick up his sleeve. No less surprising, however, is the man chasing him. He's NYPD's top criminologist, Lincoln Rhyme, a quadriplegic who works out of his home. Deaver's latest has quirky characters, lots of authentic forensic background as well as exciting police work, great Manhattan locations, and several shocking plot twists. What more could one want in a thriller?

Reginald Hill's latest Dalziel/Pascoe case, **On Beulah Height** (Delacorte, \$22.95), is a richly compelling story of psychological suspense with several plot strands woven together in a brilliant pattern. Ten years ago the Yorkshire village of Dendale was, as more than one of its denizens would later recall, a piece of heaven. Suddenly the town was stricken from two sides. The water board decided to site a dam that would flood the town's valley and force its residents to relocate on the other side of the hill. In those final days, three of Dendale's young girls disappeared, never to be seen again. It was before Peter Pascoe's time, but Andrew Dalziel was in charge of that investigation; the crimes were never solved. Now another girl has been reported missing, which brings Dalziel back to interview many of the same people while Pascoe struggles with a threat to his own daughter. More than one secret will be unearthed before this haunting tale comes to its close.

Grace Edwards garnered some fine reviews for her first mystery last year, and she's following up with a second notable Mali Anderson story titled **A Toast Before Dying** (Doubleday, \$21.95). Mali is a young black woman who lives with her jazz-musician father in Harlem. She's also a former New York cop, which is why Miss Bert

calls Mali when her baby brother has been accused of murder—the no-nonsense owner of Bertha's Beauty Shop wants a friend on their side who knows the ropes. For most readers Edwards' portrait of her old neighborhood—its unwritten rules, colorful characters, and rich history underlying its present-day struggles for survival—will provide an exotic backdrop to a tale that clips along to a surprise finish. If you're looking for a fresh series, take a look at this one.

Abigail Padgett's sixth book, **Blue** (Mysterious Press, \$22), introduces a new character in the title role. Blue McCarron is a brilliant social psychologist with a lot of past for a young woman, including twinship with a convicted felon. She's gay, totally independent, and very slowly recovering from an abrupt and inexplicable breakup of a love affair. At the novel's opening, Blue is living with her Doberman in an empty desert motel outside San Diego. She has the pool to herself, and big-bucks clients are lining up via modem to hire her as a freelance consultant. Yet Blue leaves her carefully constructed hide-away to help a man find out why his widowed older sister has confessed to murdering a stranger five years earlier and sticking the body in a rental freezer space. Padgett places her complex, off-center heroine-narrator at the heart of a cast of fascinating characters and comes up with a twisty, surprisingly interconnected plot with some great action scenes.

Marian Babson has written several charming cat mysteries, and fans will be delighted to add **Paws for Alarm** (St. Martin's, \$5.99) to the list. Nancy Harper and her family arrive to spend a charming summer in England as part of a house swap, although Nancy is sure that her professor-husband Arnold will try to abandon her and the twins at every opportunity to explore the history of their vacation country. Worse, she suspects that the entire trip was something of a plot to lure her away from her old friend Patrick, but even Nancy will admit that she's feeling cranky about the whole affair. Meeting the neighbors doesn't improve her attitude much, nor do the increasingly alarming "accidents" that befall Arnold. This is very lightweight but also lighthearted, a fast read that's both funny and fun.

Margaret Frazer's latest historical mystery starring Sister Frevisse is **The Maiden's Tale** (Berkley, \$5.99), and it's a fine time to introduce yourself to this smart and sensible nun (the niece of Geoffrey Chaucer's son, by the way) if you've not done so before now. It has been many years since Frevisse has seen London, but in 1439 the nun now finds herself sent on an errand to the capital with the ultimate goal of accepting an invitation to the splendid home of her old friend and relation, Lady Alice. It has been twenty-five years since Charles, Duke of Orleans, has been back to his homeland; as part of a

continued on page 142

THE STORY THAT WON

The May Mysterious Photograph contest was won by John Sheppard of Santa Monica, California. Honorable mentions go to Kathy Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Nancy Rowe of Columbus, Ohio; Jeff Baker of Wichita, Kansas; Frank Peirce of College Sta-



tion, Texas; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Al Cross of Sacramento, California; Lynda Burrage of Lilliwaup, Washington; Michael Warren of Coatspa, Alabama; Randall J. Covill of Atkinson, New Hampshire; and David Gott of Beaverton, Oregon.

Photo by Rolan Fajardo

THE HEIST by John Sheppard

It was 1848. The border town bank handled U.S. Army payroll for the men stationed near.

General Santa Ana desperately needed American dollars for guns and ammunition. The Mexican American War was well into its second bloody year. Thousands of U.S. dollars, sitting in the border town plaza, were at his disposal.

It was Sunday, the bank closed. He ordered four of his best guerrillas to the heist.

The men encased a cannon in a covered coach. At sunrise they crossed the border undetected.

As churchbells rang in the distance, they positioned it front of the bank, aiming the cannon at the doors.

They did not count on the rainstorm that sent two little boys seeking shelter in the doorway.

"Fire!" one guerrilla ordered.

"No, *los niños*," the cannoneer said, pointing to the two boys.

It poured, but the boys did not move. The wagon leaked, and they were soaked in no time.

The church let out. A battalion of soldiers appeared. The guerrillas had to act fast.

But the little boys would not move.

Finally the soldier lit the soggy fuse. It was useless, everything was wet, and the cannon would not fire.

Reluctantly they aborted the mission. The wagon slowly moved south, and across the Rio Grande.

Ashamed, they reported their failure to Santa Ana.

"*Los niños?*" the general asked, perplexed.

"*Sí, general, los niños.*"

That day "*los niños*" became associated with rain.

Years later it would become singular, "*El Niño*." Bad luck. Hard rain.

continued from page 140

French defeat, Charles has been a prisoner on English soil where he has become a popular houseguest himself and has in turn received royal treatment at English hands. There's a plot afoot to make peace with France once and for all; and naturally there are dangerous men who are opposed to the idea and who will not stop at murder. Frevisse soon finds herself caught in the middle of the intrigue. Frazer weaves a budding romance and a grand if unrequited passion (neither of which have anything to do with our chaste sleuth) with a bold and dangerous plot and a dash of politics into a historical tale that teems with period detail. Great fun for all lovers of history with their mystery!

Perri O'Shaughnessy's latest legal thriller featuring Nina Reilly, **Breach of Promise** (Delacorte, \$23.95), definitely doesn't stint on its promise of legal shenanigans and how-dunnit. Nina meets Lindy and Mike Markov on their yacht at the huge surprise birthday party that Lindy has planned for Mike. Mike takes the opportunity to tell Lindy that he is leaving her for the much younger woman employed in their company. Overnight Lindy finds herself kicked out of her home, pushed out of her corporate office at the company the couple founded and built to enormous profits, and sued for divorce. Enter Nina, whom Lindy hires to sue Mike for divorce. Enter, also, visions of a multimillion dollar fee to the winning lawyer, a high-powered and high-priced associate, even a pricey jury consultant as Nina assembles Lindy Markov's own "dream team." There are plenty of surprises in store for everyone, however, including a harrowing climax on Lake Tahoe. But generally O'Shaughnessy manages to turn a civil case—albeit one with millions at stake—into a thriller notable for its lack of violence and gore. Legal buffs should appreciate the detail here.

SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED":

Cathy Jolson, the designer, and Frank Inman, the mailroom clerk, each cheated on their salary by \$500.

EMPLOYEE	ADDRESS	CAME BY	POSITION	WAGE
Alice Lange	Princess Ave.	streetcar	office mgr.	\$4500
Betty Howé	Royal Ave.	Chevrolet	typist	3800
Cathy Jolson	Monarch Cir.	Volkswagen	designer	4000
Donald Gamble	King St.	Buick	pvt. sec.	4200
Edward Kell	Baron Blvd.	walked	file clk.	3700
Frank Inman	Queen St.	bus	mailroom	3500

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Alfred Hitchcock November '98

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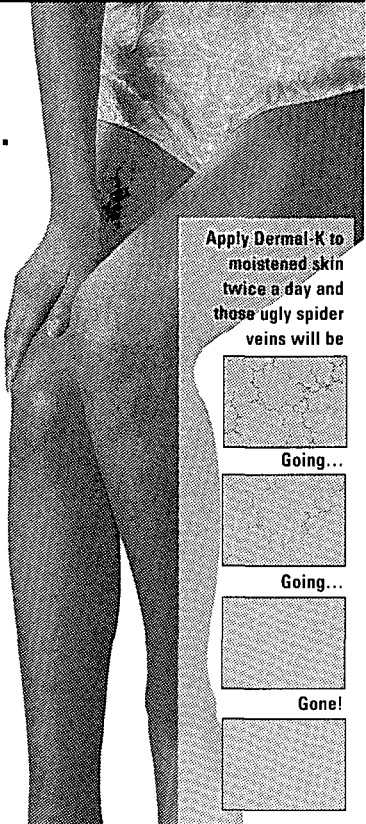
It's estimated that half of the adult female population is plagued by spider veins! Small, thin veins lying close to the skin's surface, spider veins are red or blue in color. They may appear in true "spider" fashion, with web-like

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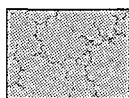
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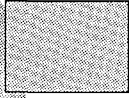
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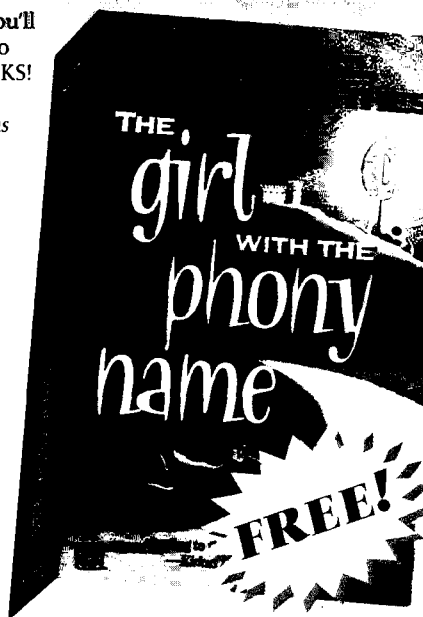
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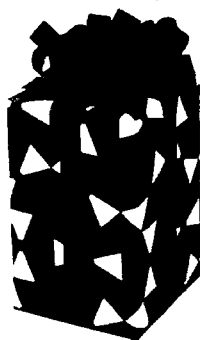
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